

Irene Nemirovsky

*A Life Of*  
**CHEKHOV**

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IRENE NEMIROVSKY

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OF CHEKHOV

TRANSLATED BY ERIK DE MAUNY

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## FOREWORD

**I**RENE Nemirovsky was arrested in July 1942 at Issy l'Evêque in the Nièvre region. Sent to the camp at Pithiviers, she was deported a few days later. That was the last anyone heard of her.

Four months later, her husband and her two brothers-in-law were arrested. They, too, were deported, and have disappeared.

In our time, it demands a particular effort if imagination is to keep pace with reality. Horror has been so overworked that many people now find it banal—some because instinctively they try to disregard it in flight, others because their sensibility has been blunted by innumerable shocks.

The fact that a woman of such exceptional qualities, of so subtle an intelligence and so fine an artistic sensibility, may have perished in Poland or Silesia is barely more important than some item in a news-in-brief column; and where the victims must be numbered in millions, it may seem unfitting to mourn one more than another.

Let us, nevertheless, in this instance pause a moment for a private survey.

Irene Nemirovsky's admirers have not been left empty-handed, for she worked right up to the end, and her work continues after her. Yet, as she was best known as a novelist, the appearance among her characters of a real person—Anton Chekhov—may

occasion surprise. His presence, however, is perfectly in harmony with the rest, for if the world of Irene Nemirovsky is an imaginary one, it is also singularly lifelike. She always refrained from describing living people or writing *romans à clef*: yet, if we have to admit that her characters are not real, how true they are—which is the important thing. Whether they are stolid businessmen, hysterical women, or young men struggling with an adverse fate, whether it is the volatile David Golder or the restless Hélène of *Vin de Solitude*, the young Christophe of *Pion sur l'Echiquier* or the weak Ada of *Les Chiens et les Loups*, or the heroines of those striking stories which make up the collection *Films Parlés*, all these beings, created by an ardent imagination, are rooted deep in human soil, nourished on life and passion and vitality, our fellow-creatures in their joys and sufferings. That is how the true artist transposes life. Irene Nemirovsky, in less than fifteen years of active creative work, has left a rich gallery of types, human because their roots are in humanity.

Certain dominant themes run through her work: exile, and the struggle for existence in Western countries. Born in Kiev, Irene Nemirovsky left her own native land to come to France, and many of her heroes follow the same course. Many of them, like her, live and struggle and suffer in France, and are fed by her own experience. In many of her novels we find the atmosphere of her own childhood in the towns and villages of Ukraine, and of her youth spent in Paris. . . .

The drama which supplied the background to her own life gave humanity to her characters: but now, that life, which began so dramatically, has ended in tragedy. Born in the East, Irene Nemirovsky went back to the East to die. Torn from her own country in order to live, she has been torn from her adopted country in order to die. Between those two events, her life was all too brief but brilliant. This young Russian writer has left behind



her pages which permanently enrich our language. We mourn in her, for the twenty years she spent among us, a French writer.

In writing this life of Anton Chekhov, Irene Nemirovsky has used something of Chekhov's own method. There are the same accumulated touches, each one of which helps to create the total impression, and the smallest detail has significance. Thus the rhythm of life is captured, through a slow yet penetrating evocation, in which the reader, like the onlooker, becomes gently imprisoned, transported by a light touch into the enchantments of everyday. Not always realising what has happened, he may resist a little. But the draught is subtle, and the spell is woven by imperceptible gestures. The slightest detail has the softness of a caress, but the effect of a tentacle. These are the features of Chekhov's own middle-class dramas. Thus, too, his life, related by a woman who spoke his language as well as she spoke French, and who gives us the true portrait of the man, with his joys and sufferings, his hopes and regrets, and all his extraordinary human warmth of feeling.

I can give no better advice to the reader than to enter into that life as I myself have done: as one enters into the life of some rare being one has loved without knowing intimately. There is nothing indiscreet about the discoveries he will make, for here is a man whom no acquaintance with his daily life can belittle. There is an element of the indiscreet and even of the indecent in many a biography and many a volume of memoirs; as if the biographer found a secret pleasure in showing his idol's feet of clay, and disclosing the petty individual hiding beneath the mantle of genius. But there is nothing of that here. The man we discover is not depreciated by the recital of his misfortunes. Coming from a large family, suffering poverty and ill-health, Anton Chekhov was faced with every difficulty life can offer. He emerged the greater for the experience. And if we have hitherto

loved and admired him through his works, that love and admiration must now only be increased.

It is true that, despite material difficulties, he had a relatively easy beginning. At twenty-six, he was already known: fame came swiftly to him. His first stories were written as a mere diversion. Yet he was tormented by scruples and doubts about himself, and hesitated long before he used his own name. It was only through much encouragement that he came to believe in himself. There is food for thought in the letter he received from Grigorovich in 1886, and in his moved reply. Such a letter certainly had an influence upon the young writer, giving him a greater awareness of his own value, and helping him perhaps to discipline himself. Grigorovich was over sixty-five. He had read one of Chekhov's stories by chance, and had been struck by it. He sensed the rare quality and promise of this new, talented writer, but he also saw the danger for a beginner of producing too much and writing about anything. He wrote to his young colleague with the double purpose of encouraging and helping him. Among all his compliments and lavish praises appear two brief sentences, which one has not always the courage to say to those impetuously embarking on a career, but which seem to me the greatest sign of confidence, admiration and friendship that an old writer could give to a young one: 'Cease all hasty work . . . Suffer hunger if need be . . .'

Chekhov's life was short, illness bringing it to a premature close. Irene Nemirovsky also departed early, but here the fatal disease raged not in her but in the world at large. And one may well wonder which of their two fates was the more tragic: and reflect that tuberculosis, which has its pauses and moments of respite, even its joys or at least its illusions, still has something human about it, a quality totally absent from the executioners of Irene Nemirovsky.

JEAN-JACQUES BERNARD.

## Chapter One

**A**LITTLE boy was sitting on a trunk and weeping because his elder brother refused to be friends with him. Yet they had not been fighting.

He repeated in a trembling voice:

'Sasha, be friends with me.'

But Sasha looked at him with cold disdain. He was five years older than his brother Anton. He went to school and he was in love.

Anton thought sadly:

'And it was he who offered me his friendship.'

That was a long, long time ago, it was true. Years ago . . . a week . . . He seemed to have noticed, moreover, that Sasha took advantage of their friendship to seize all his toys. But what did that matter, they had played such fine games! Other more pampered children might have turned up their noses at them. But then other children were brought up so differently! Recently, Anton had asked one of them:

'Do they whip you often at home?'

And the boy had answered:

'Never.'

Either he was a liar or . . . life was really queer. Yes, they had had a wonderful time. They had stolen some empty boxes from their father's shop and arranged them in such a way that, when

you lay flat and looked at them, with your head on the floor boards, you saw a suite of rooms lit by candle-ends, and you felt you were on the threshold of a palace: inside lived a wooden soldier. They had picked fruit in the neighbours' orchards, and devoured it in secret. They had dressed up. They had gone swimming in the sea. Now all that was over, cut short for ever.

Sasha threw a last glance at his brother, and departed. Anton was still a baby, beneath his notice: there was no way they could understand each other. He went off to strut about in the Public Gardens, while Anton remained alone on his trunk. The children's room was small and shabby, with murky windows and dirty floor boards. Outside was the churned-up mud of the road-way, like all the roads in the small southern Russian town where Sasha and Anton Chekhov lived.

If one left the house and walked for a short distance, one came to the seashore, while a short walk in another direction led straight into the open steppe. Within could be heard the bustling steps of the mother, as she went between the 'large room' and the tiny kitchen, with its earthen floor, built near to the house. There was plenty of work for the mother of a family of six, and no servant. The father could be heard reciting prayers and singing. Suddenly, the prayers ceased, and mingled shouts and sobs reached Anton's ears. His father was beating one of the young shop assistants. That went on for some time, then the hymns were resumed, to be brusquely interrupted by a further furious clamour:

'Fool! Blockhead!' the father was shouting, this time at Anton's mother.

The child felt neither astonishment nor indignation; he was not even aware of being unhappy; it was too much an everyday occurrence . . . Only there was a constricted feeling in his chest, and he was both sad and pleased to be alone. You were always a little frightened, being alone, but at least no one bothered you

and no one beat you. After a while, however, the sensation of fear grew stronger, and he slipped out of the room to go and look for his mother. She was a frail woman, swift to take fright, who wept a lot and complained aloud of her husband and the life she led. There was no one to heed her: they were all used to her tears, and her outcry fell on deaf ears.

Tomorrow perhaps, Anton thought, he might be allowed to go out in one of the fishing boats, and they would eat the fish he brought back. The idea suddenly filled him with delight, with a mischievous and tender gaiety.

But now it was almost supper time: after that, there would be a final prayer, and the day would be over.

## Chapter Two

THE small detached building with clay-coated walls which the Chekhovs rented stood at one end of a courtyard. Across the mud, the weeds, the broken bricks and refuse which littered the yard, daily usage had made crudely traced paths, one leading to the porch, another to the stable. The hovel itself seemed to list to one side, dumpy and tired like an old woman. Beneath the guttering, a barrel had been placed to catch the water on rainy days, since water was a rare and precious commodity. Small-paned windows, a wooden-roofed porch, three small rooms and a kitchen—such was the house in which Anton was born.<sup>1</sup> The 'large room' was his father's domain, in a smaller one both parents slept, while the smallest room of all, with Anton's cradle, belonged to the children. In the 'large room', one entire corner was lined with ikons, as was the custom with pious Orthodox believers, and before them, a light burned day and night. On a stand lay the missal and the Holy Scriptures, illuminated by a large candle in a copper candlestick: and on certain days prescribed by the Church, Chekhov senior had incense burnt before the images. Although a poor man and careful over coppers, he never begrudged the incense, and whole clouds of it were wafted through the rooms, vanquishing even the smell of sour cabbage that drifted from the kitchen.

<sup>1</sup> 17th January 1860. (All dates are given in Old Style.)

Acacias grew behind the house: and in spring the muddy courtyards were blazoned with flowers. The town, built on the shores of the Sea of Azov, was called Taganrog. It had one street which, as people proudly pointed out, was 'almost European', for in it could be seen buildings rising three and four stories high, shops, and a theatre. It would have been difficult to find a shop sign without some spelling mistakes, but no one worried about that. For, on the other hand, the roadway and footpaths were paved for a hundred yards, and it was not every Russian town that could boast such luxury. A little further on, however, only the footpaths remained, and soon they dwindled into a muddy track. It was here that the Chekhovs lived. Where the outskirts ended, the steppe began: a vast flat plain, without a single mountain or forest, swept by furious winds from the East, out of Asia. In winter they came with snow; in summer, they sighed with hot furnace breath. The port, whatever the season, became more and more silted up. And yet, the port was the very heart of Taganrog. It was a merchant city, dating back to the days when Peter the Great decided to build a bastion in that wild region to protect his possessions against the Turks; then he had made it a port, and Taganrog, by the beginning of the 19th century, had become prosperous and flourishing. Its main export was wheat, and both Odessa and Rostov-on-the-Don ceded it first place.

There was life and movement then in Taganrog, the old people sighed. 'The best actors in Russia used to give plays here, and we had an Italian Opera, like every self-respecting southern town, like Odessa . . .' Then came the bad days: the sand which the rivers had been bringing down for centuries finally lifted the sea-bed, and it became a danger to shipping . . . besides, the modern vessels were so large . . . and at last, to cap all, a railway was built to link the rival port of Rostov-on-the-Don directly with Vladicaucasia. Taganrog, losing its usefulness, was ruined.

In a few years, an air of dreary somnolence had fallen over the

little town. It still looked attractive from a distance, with its deep blue sky, sunshine and sea, but as soon as one entered it: 'What squalor, what ignorance, what emptiness!' Its silence and its mud were what struck travellers most. In autumn, and during the spring thaw, passing through Taganrog was like crossing a stream by jumping from stone to stone—'whoever missed his footing landed up to the knees in a sea of mud'. In summer, in the hot streets, the dust no sweeper's broom had ever disturbed rolled along in slow, dense clouds. A dog nosed at a pile of refuse, the strains of a harmonica sounded in the yard, two drunkards began to fight . . . occasionally resounded the dragging footsteps of a passer-by. No one dreamt of repairing the roof or the door, or giving the house a fresh coat of paint. They simply made the best of things.

In Russia, these provincial outposts were called 'deaf towns', and certainly no other epithet would have fitted them better: for their peace was profound, and their ears were closed to the bustle of the outside world. They slept as did their inhabitants after a heavy meal, with blinds lowered, windows closed against the least breath of air, at peace with God and the Tsar, their minds a vacuum.

But for a child, the loneliest and most abandoned spot on earth is full of variety and life. So the young Anton was not bored in his native town. He was never tired of watching the ships, the bridges, and the sea. As a particular treat, he went to dinner with his Uncle Mitrofan, who sometimes gave him a copper or two. He knew the names of those who lived in the identical little houses with their weed-choked courtyards, and, like his mother and his brothers, he was even aware of every detail of their existence—what they had eaten the day before, who had died, who had been born, and who had asked for the daughter's hand in marriage. He liked to go and play in the Public Gardens, with the terraces running down to the sea.



Unfortunately, he was rarely given freedom for that particular pleasure. On spring evenings, he would sit under the wooden porch roof, on the flight of small, warped steps staked in the earth. Every house had one of these small wooden porches, where the family relaxed once the heat of the day was over: the mother for a few moments would desert her sewing machine, while the children bickered among themselves. From the Public Gardens were wafted the opening strains of the military band. In travelling through that dusty air, the rolling of the drums and the clashing of the cymbals were attenuated and softened, losing their martial vivacity, and becoming imbued instead with a confused melancholy.

It was at this moment that the father always appeared, a broad-shouldered figure, with a flowing beard and a heavy hand.

'Back to work, Antosha,' he would say. 'You've been mooning about out here quite long enough. Into the shop with you!'

## Chapter Three

THE Chekhovs had six children—five boys and a girl. The eldest two, Alexander (Sasha) and Nicholas, were already in gawky adolescence, with narrow chests, overlong arms, and a timid and affected air. They were beginning to look down on Taganrog and its inhabitants, to dream of Moscow, and to take their father's orders with increasing surliness. They did not dare to show open defiance, but their eyes answered back for them. When they had suffered a beating, they spoke in threatening tones of a 'wound inflicted on human dignity', and talked of suicide. Their mother prayed to God, and closed the doors so that the father would not hear.

Anton was still a child, a handsome little boy, fair-haired, with clear complexion, large features, and a gay, gentle expression. Ivan, the fourth, had a bad reputation among his brothers: he was cautious and stuck-up, they said, always ready to grab the tastiest bit at table or the best place by the stove. The two youngest ones, Marie and Michael, did not count: being four and three, they were of interest only to their mother.

They all looked healthy enough: they might well cast pitying glances at the sallow-skinned little Greeks and round-shouldered little Jews who ran about in the port. The Chekhovs came of strong, peasant stock, who for generations past had endured the bitter winters, hunger, blows and overwork without harm. Thus the father and mother saw nothing unnatural in the chil-

dren's health, but regarded it as a gift from God, to be used and misused with impunity. There could be nothing harmful in sleeping in short, broken snatches, or running about the yard in holey boots. Cleanliness was useless and immoral. Prayers fortified the soul: the body could be left to the good Lord's keeping.

This was the view generally held by the inhabitants of Taganrog, to which they had every right, since neither climate nor fevers claimed many victims from them. The Emperor Alexander I, on holiday in Taganrog, had been there only two months when he caught a fever and died: but people of a more modest condition recovered perfectly. The inhabitants might drink impure water, treat the sick with dubious infusions of herbs, and dress their wounds with spiders' webs, but deaths were no more frequent there than elsewhere.

A peasant's life and body were not such precious things. It was only for a short time past, in fact, that the Chekhovs had been able to call their bodies their own and not their masters': which may have been the very reason they treated this flesh, these bones, with such scornful disregard, just as savages might find pleasure in wrecking some delicate mechanism entrusted to them. Anton's grandfather had been born a serf, but had gradually risen to the position of steward, while amassing a considerable sum. Thus, well before the liberation of the serfs, he had been able to buy himself and his family out: 700 roubles a head was the price paid by the *mouzhik* Egor Chekh to his master for himself and his four sons. One daughter remained, for whom there was no money: but the master, in a fit of generosity, released her as well, like a shopkeeper who throws one in for good measure.

Egor Chekh was an intelligent and harsh man, one of those who served the nobles like a faithful watchdog, grinding down the peasants on their masters' behalf better than the latter could have done, simply because they were intimately aware of the

weaknesses and tricks of the poor people. He was bailiff for a vast estate in the Ukraine, the Countess Platov's property, where the Chekhov children sometimes passed their holidays.

Two of Egor's sons, Mitrofan and Paul, settled in the town. Wealth did not come their way, however. Paul Egorovich especially was dogged by ill luck. He had begun his career as the servant of a merchant. From a harsh and famished childhood, during which he swept out the shop, slept on the ground, and bowed his head beneath blows, he had grown into a strong, thick-set, bearded man, whose cuffs and commands others must now suffer and obey. He was 'merchant of the third guild', or of a low order, just above the artisans, but still far removed from those who traded in grain and wine, the glory and pride of Taganrog.

He was a shopkeeper. A sign at the door of the shop announced in gold letters on a black background that he sold 'tea, coffee, soap, sausage, and other colonial products'.

Anton had great respect for his father. In the house and behind the counter, Paul Egorovich was undisputed master. He exerted the absolute rule of the Russian paterfamilias of the lower classes who, treated like a slave himself by those more powerful, in turn lorded it over his family like some petty Oriental despot. His wife's duty was to remain silent, the children's to obey: his own place was ordained by God, and he would answer to Him alone for all these souls which must be guided in the right path. As to how they should be guided—it was not for nothing that God had given man a stout pair of fists!

Alexander called him brutal, greedy and unfeeling: but Alexander always exaggerated. He liked to deceive others and himself, either to earn people's pity, or to make them laugh, even at his own family's expense. There were moments when Anton really loved his father. His way of drinking without getting drunk, for example, was something to be grateful for. Other men

rolled about on the ground, and only Paul Chekhov grew gay and tender, and recalled the social graces he had acquired, God alone knew how, in his hard childhood days. He played the violin and sang. But if he had his good sides, woe betide anyone who did not spring immediately to do his bidding. At once, the capricious despot in him reawakened. He flew into a rage at the slightest contradiction. He made such a dreadful scene for an over-salted plate of soup at table that the mother burst into tears and the children quaked with fright.

The father was extremely pious: he thought that God Himself commanded one to be strong and make oneself feared. His religion was a mixture of sincerity and humility, coarseness and cruelty. As for his sins, it was not in himself alone that he castigated them: above all, he tracked them down and punished them in the souls of his children. He loved his children, yet there was something in their very weakness and dependence on him that irritated and, as it were, intoxicated him, making shouts and insults rain down from his lips, and cuffs and blows from his fists. He was not really cruel: the sufferings of others simply did not touch him. He himself had been cuffed and ill-treated as a child, and felt none the worse for it now. It was convenient to pass off his rage on his wife, his children, and the young shop assistants: and since business was bad in the impoverished town, he had plenty of motives for rage. In any case, he loathed the shop. A man cannot live without some passion, and he, who neither drank nor ran after women, had one wonderful passion, which coloured his entire existence and consoled him for everything else. This was, indeed, his real life, for which the shop and the house were but an illusory façade. He loved the church—its offices, chants and prayers, the perfume of incense and the sound of the bells. Perhaps, like all despots, he felt lonely, surrounded by slaves instead of friends: perhaps the church allayed his hunger and served him in the

guise of a companion or a lover. Driving bargains and counting his meagre gains gave him no pleasure, and at the slightest pretext he was ready to cry:

'Sasha! Kolya! Antosha! I'm going out. One of you take my place in the shop.'

The church was nearby. He would stay there for hours, kneeling in the shadows on the icy floor, and joining with his rough peasant voice in the magnificent chants of the Orthodox Church. During all this time the children were shivering in the shop. Everything was in order.

Anton could have pardoned him that, but it seemed to him he would never forget the whippings his father so frequently inflicted on him. It was not the physical pain so much as the frightful feeling of humiliation: he was ashamed both for his father and himself. But naturally, there was nothing he could say, since he was not the only one, and his brothers had the same punishment meted out to them. He thought that all fathers must be alike.

And in fact, people in Taganrog in the 1860's were not more wicked than in other times and in other countries, but brutality was a habit which finally coarsened both body and soul. Life there was barbarous and sad. One might not be constantly aware of the fact, and certainly, a little boy like Anton forgot it altogether. But the barbarity and sadness were always present, lurking in the background. They ended by making themselves felt beneath even the most innocent merriment. Anton could not be completely happy: by nature he was gay and lively, with a taste for raillery; instinctively he admired gracefulness, good humour and good manners, and everything around him was harsh and coarse. People tortured animals, lied and perjured: then with those same mouths intoned their prayers. You had to kiss the great, rough hand from which you had just received a beating because it was father's hand, and because 'the power of the father comes from God'.

## Chapter Four

**T**HE mother did not like talking about herself. She was a slender woman with small features, 'tender and serene'.

When she was not bustling about the kitchen, she was sitting at her sewing machine. She made all the children's clothes herself, and her mind was constantly assailed by apparently simple problems, whose solution eluded her: such as, how to make Anton's overcoat last another year, or where to find material to lengthen Marie's dress.

She loved her children dearly, and Anton in particular; he seemed to feel sorry for her. She would have liked to take him in her arms, fondle him, and tell him stories. But there was no time, she was always falling behind with her work. The love which she could not (or did not know how to) express in kisses or fine words lay heavy on her heart, and the only way she could appease it was by feeding her children up and imagining what she could give them for the next meal. Food was solid and plentiful, and so cheap that none but the poorest had to go without. It was a great consolation to her to be able to give them plenty to eat. The rest of their upbringing was their father's concern. It was up to him to set them a good example, to instruct them with sound advice and edifying tales.

Sometimes, however, in the evening, as the children were dropping off to sleep, their mother would tell them of her

travels as a little girl, when she had gone by carriage through the length and breadth of Russia.

She was the daughter of a merchant—a fact which she dwelt on with some pride. The Chekhovs were peasants, whereas she came from a higher class in the Russian hierarchy. But as soon as she had said it, she felt confused; for a woman must not be superior to the husband God had given her.

Her father had been a cloth merchant named Morozov. While he travelled from town to town, she stayed with her mother and sisters at an aunt's place in Morschansk. One winter, fire broke out in the house, and the women found themselves homeless in the street.

'It was a sad year, children,' she said, nodding her head and sighing. 'We learned soon after that my father had died of cholera. But in what place he had died, and where he was buried remained unknown: we did not even know whether he had been given a Christian burial, according to the rites of the Orthodox Church. My mother hired a carriage, took us with her, and set off in search of his grave.'

The children listened with absorbed interest. They could see the carriage swaying in the ruts, jolting over the rough roads, through the mud and the first snowfalls . . . the storms along the route, and the posting-houses which were sometimes so dirty, so full of strange and frightening figures, that mother and children preferred to spend the night sleeping on the open steppe.

Then the *nyanya* who was also present would interrupt her washing, and launch into obscure and sinister legends, in which memories of serfdom and the Crimean War were jumbled up with tales of brigands and witches.

If the nurse was to be believed, what riches were concealed by the naked steppe round Taganrog! Treasures were hidden in the beds of streams, at the foot of hills. The Cossacks, it was said, had captured gold from Napoleon's armies, and for fear the



State would seize it, had buried it in the steppe. Even earlier, in Peter's time, brigands had plundered a caravan carrying gold from St. Petersburg to Taganrog. One day, the gold would be found.

The little boys listened, mute and wide-eyed.

Outside, night and a deep silence had settled over the town. Then a carriage went by, and its broken springs and squeaking axles filled the air with the cries and groans of a soul in torment. A candle lit up the mother's face as she bent over her sewing machine, her hands sliding the cloth forward with a deft and rapid movement. She was warmed now by her memories of the old days, and did not need too much pressing before she told of her subsequent flight from Taganrog, while she was pregnant with Alexander. That had happened during the Crimean War, when the shores of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov were under fire from the enemy. In the end, the recent war, and their mother's travels twenty years earlier, all blurred and ran together into a single confused legend: the children were fascinated, and listened in silence.

Then one of them asked:

'And was grandfather's grave ever found?'

'No, never.'

And when one came to think of it, how, in all the vast land that was Russia, among the millions of living and dead that it contained, could anyone have found a solitary grave? The children were astonished and moved by the futility of the quest, and all the vain hazards of the journey. The mother finished her story:

'We never found it. We travelled through the whole of Russia, from Morchansk to Taganrog. There the sea began, and we could go no further. My mother had friends in the town, kind-hearted people who gave us shelter: gradually we found our feet. Then one day, I met your father . . .'

## Chapter Five

**I**N his shop, Paul Chekhov was grocer, herbalist and haberdasher combined. Tea, olive oil, brilliantine, paraffin, macaroni, dried fish, were heaped up pell-mell on dusty shelves set in a dark alcove. Above the counter hung garlands of sweets strung upon a thread, like sequins on a necklace. Herrings swam in barrels of pickling brine. The 'colonial products'—halva, Turkish Delight, dried currants—attracted the small fry of the port. The customers were poor people—peasants, sailors, petty Greek traders.

In winter, the shop was icy, the door being constantly opened and shut to admit the cold winds of the steppe. In summer, it seemed as though the smell of the merchandise had attracted every fly in Taganrog. The flies provided a distraction, however: it was amusing to discover new ways of killing them off, such as placing jars filled with water on the table, the mouth of each jar being concealed by a piece of bread soaked in honey and pierced with holes, through which the flies fell and were drowned.

When any of the Chekhov children had to take their father's place in the shop, it was not so much to serve the occasional customer as to keep a watchful eye on the two assistants, Andriusha and Gavriusha, for their father was always afraid of being robbed. Andriusha and Gavriusha were the children of a poor

Ukrainian peasant woman, who had thought she was assuring them a happy future in abandoning them to Paul Egorovich. They were poor, beaten, ill-fed little wretches, who received no pay because they were serving a five years' apprenticeship.

While the proprietor's sons were receiving money and giving change, keeping an eye out for counterfeit coins, and carefully noting items such as 'two kopecks of tea; sweets; a kopeck for two,' the small assistants had to run and bring bottles of vodka from the cellar. For Paul Egorovich's shop was also a tavern. His cellar had a good store of wine and beer, and during the long winter evenings, the same regular customers would gather at Chekhov's for a drink and a yarn.

Winter and summer alike, the door was opened at 5 a.m., and was never closed before 11 in the evening. Andriusha and Gavriusha, suffering from a chronic lack of sleep, dozed off just as they sat or stood, the moment the master's eye left them for an instant. Anton had to learn his lessons as best he could, amid the din of clinking glasses, shouts and laughter. He tried to focus all his attention on his books: the lessons were hard, and for every low mark he was doubly punished, first at the school, then at home. But in spite of all his efforts, the sound of steps and voices distracted him. Now it was a sailor, come to buy cigars, now a peasant asking for some herb for his sick wife—'she's never got over that last confinement'. (His father sold blood-cleansing infusions and monastery relics at the same time.) Sometimes a child came in to dispute over the price of the coloured candles arranged in red, star-shaped wooden boxes. The small windows were barred as in a prison, the floor was dirty: the counter was covered with a torn and faded piece of oilcloth.

Anton glanced up, and saw that snow was falling. The candle-light quivered on his book. He hated being cooped up indoors: it would be the same again tomorrow, he reflected sadly—

while his friends were playing outside, he would be glued to the shop. But an unhappy child is able to glean fragments of happiness everywhere, just as a plant will draw to itself, even in the most stony ground, the life-giving elements it needs. Anton amused himself watching and listening to people. Monks begging alms for a neighbouring monastery would come to drink a dram on the sly; or at other times, sailors would talk of the voyages they had made. Sometimes, also, there were quarrels between the herdsmen and the small grain merchants, who formed the backbone of the customers. Their trade consisted in buying the cartloads of grain which the peasants brought into the town, and reselling them to richer merchants, who in their turn sold them to the millionaires of the region, the Vaglianos and the Scaramangnis. But such trading went on principally in spring and summer. In the off-season, the merchants, having nothing better to do, used to meet in Paul Egorovich's shop as in a club.

Anton listened to them all. Each had his own way of speaking, his own gestures and mannerisms, his own stories which belonged peculiarly to him, his race and class. Russians, Greeks, Jews, priests or merchants, all played in a sort of eternal comedy, of which he, Anton Chekhov, was the sole spectator. Up to that time (he was ten or eleven) he had never been to the theatre, but his elder brothers had explained the scenes and dialogues and backgrounds of that strange world. But here too, strangers passing through the town, entered, told their story, and were gone. It was amusing to watch them, and still more amusing to imitate them: to speak in the high, sing-song, breaking voice of the young monks, to assume the deep solemn tone of some fat priest, or to ape the Jew's boy who came selling packages of tea. Anton, head resting on his hand (the rather large head which had earned him the nickname 'Tadpole' among his friends), abandoned his Latin book to see what was

going on. His eyes sparkled. In the house, he would mime for his brothers, his mother, and his father too, if the latter were in a good mood, all the wiles of the customers, all their sighs and grimaces. The Sunday before, at church, he had seen the town governor, a most important person! But for all his eminence, he too had his ridiculous side, in the curious way he knelt, and blew his nose, and scanned the congregation. Anton smiled in anticipation at the way he would show the governor entering the church!

But the evening dragged on, and Anton, like the small assistants, grew sleepy: he never got sufficient sleep. School, shop and church combined left little time for rest. Their father thought that the boys would have time enough for sleeping when they were grown up, and that a man was given his youth in order to work hard and help his parents. Gradually Anton's head drooped over his book, and his eyes closed. At last the customers left, the shop was shut up, and he could go to bed.

When father had gone out, Sasha was not at all averse to taking his place and ordering his younger brothers about. But it was no easy matter getting Anton to obey him: this was no longer the little boy who had sat on a trunk and cried:

'Be my friend . . .'

In Sasha's opinion, the brat became more independent every day. And he had his own peculiar way of demonstrating his independence. He was neither cold and serious like Ivan, nor wayward and absurd like Nicholas; but with patience and great determination he eluded the influence of other people. No one ever knew for certain what he was thinking or feeling. Young Anton's mind and soul were protected from others by a curious modesty, such as a girl may feel for her body. Sasha, meanwhile, expected to enjoy the elder's privilege: he liked to be admired and imitated. One day, vexed that Anton would not give way

to him, he beat him. It happened in the shop, while the father was out. Anton fled.

'He'll go and complain,' Alexander thought with annoyance. Anton did not return.

'He's certainly gone telling tales to father,' Alexander reflected, feeling more and more uneasy.

He went out of the shop, expecting the worst. For a long time he remained alone. Then, at last, he saw Anton with one of his cousins. They were walking slowly and gravely by, and as he passed his brother, Anton neither spoke nor even looked at him properly, as if in his place had been merely one of their father's barrels, as if Alexander himself did not exist!

A curious emotion welled up in Sasha's heart, compounded of anger and humiliation, sorrow and respect. He gazed after the retreating figures of the two boys, and, without knowing why, suddenly began to cry.

## Chapter Six

**P**AUL EGOROVICH was neither a bad man nor a stupid one. On the contrary, he had a lively imagination, good taste, even wit after his own fashion, and a deep and sincere love for music. But some men are so made that for those around them their virtues are as much to be feared as their vices.

All the passion and poetry of his shopkeeper's existence came from the Church, from its services and chants. But praying and singing alone were not enough. In his own childhood, while he was still the property of his master, the village priest had taught him to play the violin and sing in the choir. His ambition now was to form and direct his own choir. And God had given him the choir he desired: it would be composed of his five boys. Their pure voices would be raised day and night in praise of God, and up in heaven, God would know that his servant, Paul Egorovich Chekhov, had not neglected his duty, but had instructed his children in piety and service to the Church.

'In everything touching the divine office, Paul Egorovich was strict, severe and exacting. If, on the principal holy days, matins had to be sung, he would wake his children at two or three in the morning and, no matter what the weather, lead them to the church. There were those kind-hearted people who affirmed that to deprive children of necessary sleep was harmful, and that to compel them to strain their adolescent voices and chests

was plainly a sin. But Paul Egorovich held quite a different view . . .

“— Why, when it’s not harmful to run about in the yard and shout at the top of one’s lungs, should it be harmful to sing in the services of the church? The novices at the monastery spend whole nights saying prayers and singing hymns, and are none the worse for it. The church singing does nothing but strengthen young lungs. I myself have sung from childhood, and, thanks be to God, I am in good health. It is never wrong to take pains for God.”

On Saturdays, the whole family went to church. (There were no seats in the orthodox churches, and one had either to stand or kneel.) After returning home, they sang further hymns to the Saviour or to the Virgin in front of the holy ikons, all, mother and children, prostrate and striking the ground with their foreheads, while the father led the singing. But even this did not satisfy him completely. There was a tinge of secular vanity to his sincere religious feeling: he liked to have his children’s voices admired. All Taganrog heard them sing, sometimes at the Greek monastery, sometimes in the chapel of the Palace (that was the name given to the house in which the Emperor Alexander I died; or from which, according to the legend, he had fled, leaving the body of a soldier in his place).

The local aristocracy used to gather in the chapel. The voices of Alexander, Nicholas and Anton trembled from zeal and fear. Candle flames lit up the massive, gilded ikons, and tears of wax dropped slowly on to the stone-flagged floor. The father was happy: these were the good moments, which allowed him to forget money worries and the long drudgery of the shop. He hoped that things would go better now; he owned a strip of land, a present from old Egor Mikhailovich; he would build a house there. Then there would be no rent to pay, and he would be his own master! Somebody would lend him the necessary



sum . . . But such unending calculations tired his brain: everything would turn out right. He drove such thoughts from his mind, and gave all his attention to the children's singing. They were singing a trio called *Archangels' Voices*: he could not listen without the tears springing to his eyes. He prayed at length, and crossed himself fervently: he adored God.

The children did not share his feeling of joy. Their father was congratulated, even looked upon with envy. How well he was bringing up his children! And what if he were giving them an education above their station—later they could enter the University, and thus ensure a tranquil old age for their parents. One of the Chekhov children, Nicholas, was very gifted at drawing, and might become an artist. But what was better than any learning, Chekhov senior taught his children the fear of God. The children must be very proud to demonstrate their talent before everyone. The children, privately, felt more like 'little galley slaves'.

Anton was never to forget the fatigues and boredom of those days, the interminable church services, and the return home at dawn through icy streets. A religion inculcated with blows of the whip was so remote from true belief that in the end he ceased to believe in anything at all. God could not possibly find pleasure in something which cost him, Anton, so much misery. There were certain festivals, however, that he loved, such as Easter night, the most solemn and marvellous of all nights in orthodox Russia, when people do not even pray but when 'there is a sort of childish, unformulated joy . . . which seeks some pretext to break through to the surface and overflow in movement, no matter what movement, merely a surging and thronging together of people . . . The same extraordinary animation is the most striking feature of the Easter service itself . . . Everywhere one looks, there are the flames . . . of gleaming, sputtering candles . . . and a bustling, joyous chant . . .'

All his life, Anton loved the sound of bells; but cold and lack of sleep, his father's severity, his own lassitude and boredom—these had already destroyed any piety in him. And yet, years after, when he was a sad and ailing celebrity writing to the woman he loved, he still ended his letters with those tender invocations preserved in his memory from early childhood: 'God keep you in good health . . . The holy Angels bless and protect you.' But he could not help detesting the things his father had held so dear—the ritual and the external ceremonial.

Thus through pitch-black streets—for street lighting except in the centre of the town was unknown in Taganrog—stumbling in the mud, and half dead with sleep, the Chekhov children returned home. In order to see their way in the dark, passers-by carried little lanterns attached to their button-holes. It would soon be time to open the shop, Paul Egorovich was thinking: it was scarcely worth while sending the children to bed.

## Chapter Seven

ANY brilliance and prosperity that Taganrog possessed was Greek. The fortune of a Vagliano was said to amount to fifty million roubles. The Scaramangnis, the Alferakis, and others like them, were lords of the town: the grain trade was in their hands. Persecuted in Turkey, they had moved to Odessa, to Taganrog, and settled in all the ports of the Black Sea, the Sea of Azov, and the Caspian, where, while indolent Slavs drifted into ruin, they amassed fortunes. Paul Egorovich attributed this success to some secret known only to the Greeks, and which could only be learned by speaking their language and breathing the air of Athens. So as soon as he was old enough, Anton had been sent to the Greek school. Later, he would be sent on his travels to the country which gave birth to such wise and prudent men, who traded so profitably in wine, grain and olives. In this way, he would grow rich, and become a consolation to his parents, the prop of their declining years.

The whole of the Greek school in Taganrog was contained in one room, in which each bench represented a class. In return for a present of wine, oil or tobacco, the teachers—one of whom, Spiro, was a commission-agent in grain—put the pupils up or down from class to class (depending on the size of the present), or from bench to bench. Both teachers were harsh and

ignorant, and used the birch on their pupils. Anton's companions were the urchins of the port, the children of sailors and cobblers and tailors, all dirty and coarse and ill-treated. The lessons were given in Greek, which the little Chekhovs scarcely knew.

In the end, Paul Egorovich rescued his children from the hands of Spiro and his colleague, and Anton entered the Gymnasium. Now he was happy, for he could at last don the uniform which dazzled all the little girls. Anton was really handsome: he had a fresh face, with clear-cut features, and a steady, self-confident gaze: his chest swelled out the uniform tunic with its gleaming buttons.

The Taganrog Gymnasium was like any other in the country at that period. It was an age of political plots and terrorist outbreaks. In every growing schoolboy and every budding student, the State seemed to see a dangerous revolutionary. Nothing could have been more clumsy than the excess of discipline, the panic consternation caused by any whisper of progress or freedom, and the cold suspiciousness . . . Revolution became a thrilling game; and the authorities tried to calm the excitement which gripped the children by an absurd severity and a whole complicated system of spying and intrigue. Masters exercised a 'political' surveillance not only over the children but over the other masters. One of the teaching staff complained to the authorities:

'My colleagues smoke during the meetings of the teachers' council: they do not stop to consider that an ikon and the portrait of H.M. the Emperor adorn the walls of the council room.'

The supreme task was to create obedient subjects for the Emperor, and the authorities acted in accordance. But their zeal for the public welfare was poorly rewarded, for in the Taganrog Gymnasium, as in practically every other Gymnasium

in Russia, all the boys were interested in politics and in the most revolutionary spirit. Only Anton Chekhov, at fourteen, remained aloof from clandestine meetings, and took no part in discussions where young philosophers of thirteen to sixteen demolished and rebuilt the world. Neither did he ostentatiously read forbidden works. By nature he was independent, sceptical, given to raillery. He was shown the road he had to follow—first by his father, then by his teachers and companions; but he preferred to find his own way. He felt an instinctive aversion for the resounding phrases and platitudes of the group. He eluded other people's grasp, without insolence or angry outbursts, but gently and firmly, and even at that time 'no one knew completely what went on in the depths of his soul'.

Like his companions, Anton learned a good deal of Latin and Greek during his adolescent years; like them, he spent hours on end in the Public Gardens. In the Gardens, the boys and girls would slip away from their classes, to meet in the shady avenues, behind the lilac bushes, or on the steps of the great stairway leading down to the Sea of Azov.

The masters scoured the Gardens, on the look out for loving couples, and the tenderest promises would be cut short by a voice saying in frigid tones:

'Chekhov, go to your class!'

What memories did Anton Chekhov retain of the eleven years he spent in the Gymnasium, and of his teachers? (Twice his marks were too low for him to pass into a higher class: work in the shop, and the nights spent at church, hampered his studies.) When he was grown up, he sometimes had a dream of an extraordinarily sad and abandoned place, 'with large, slippery stones, the chill water of autumn. . . . When I run a long way from the river, I see in my path the crumbling entrance to a cemetery, a funeral, my old teachers. . . .'

## Chapter Eight

ANTON was thirteen when he saw a stage and scenery for the first time. The Taganrog theatre still preserved a little of the glitter of earlier days, when actors from Moscow and St. Petersburg came there on tour. Such provincial theatres, in spite of their dusty appearance, antiquated seating, and primitive stage machinery, had excellent companies in whose repertoire might be found many good Russian and foreign plays.

*La Belle Hélène*, light comedies, melodramas, vaudevilles copied from the French, and *The Government Inspector*—Anton applauded them all.

He had to keep a sharp watch out for the masters from the Gymnasium. The boys were not encouraged to go to the theatre, which was regarded as a school of free thought and indiscipline! Their pleasure, however, was merely heightened by this fresh opportunity to flaunt the authorities. Hence all their ruses, and the pride they felt at slipping under the very noses of their teachers into one of these temples of immorality where they learned of a life so different from that of Taganrog, a life of freedom and colourful incident. At fifteen, Anton used to push his way boldly into the wings and talk with the actors.

Everyone knew everyone else in the audience, from the stalls to the top gallery. During the intervals, Anton and his

brothers, perched up in the cheapest seats, would call down to the wealthy Greek merchants sitting in the stalls and ogling the actresses' legs. It was a family atmosphere.

On returning home, Anton was haunted by memories of the evening, and tried to resurrect them by precocious and haphazard reading: but the theatre itself remained his true passion. He wrote tragedies and farces, then turned actor himself, and together with Alexander and Nicholas, and school friends from the Gymnasium, set up his own company.

He loved dressing and making up, sketching a charcoal moustache on his face and mystifying people. One day, dressed as a beggar, he walked right through Taganrog and entered the house of his Uncle Mitrofan who, being either absent-minded or indulgent, gave him three kopecks. This success elated him. He was always thinking up some gay piece of nonsense, launching into an impromptu comic scene at the meal table—certainly young Anton knew how to laugh! And throughout his life he preserved the same gaiety, the same gentle playfulness, the same gift of laughter—not merely of 'laughter through tears', burdened with satirical or moral undertones, but of the innocent and joyful laughter of a child.

At last the Chekhov children grew bold enough to put on performances in public. These usually took place in a barn, or in the house of some more well-to-do friend who possessed a drawing-room. There were times when everything seemed to go well. The father's business was as uncertain as ever, but he was trying to conquer his bad luck. His house now finished, he was opening a new shop. It was an absurd venture: the first gave him worry enough, and brought in little, but, in Paul Egorovich's imagination, the second shop would solve all his problems. Full of hope for a brilliant future, he decided to give his children the best education he could: they must all go to the Gymnasium. About the same period, he arranged for them to

have French lessons from a certain Mme. Chopin, and music lessons from a bank clerk who taught the piano in his spare time.

It was at this time also that the Chekhov children started a magazine: *The Stammerer*. Alexander and Anton wrote the text, and Nicholas did the illustrations. Then the two older ones, reaching the age to continue their studies at the University, left Taganrog for Moscow. Anton remained as sole author and editor of *The Stammerer*, but he was not discouraged and kept the paper going.

Where others in adolescence turn to writing poetry, fragments of novels and lyrical confessions, Anton plunged into his humorous paper and his improvised comedy scenes with their light and mocking wit. At that time and in those surroundings, a boy of his age was treated with too much rough contempt to be able to take himself seriously and describe, even for his own pleasure, his dreams and sensations. It was all very well for a young nobleman, a Pushkin or a Lermontov, who had been pampered from childhood upwards. Anton Chekhov, the shopkeeper's son, had humbler aspirations. He too, nevertheless, needed a spiritual refuge, somewhere to escape from the rebukes of his father and the sighs of his mother. He discovered such a refuge after his own fashion in his light-hearted little comedies. Even then he was thinking of the future: he had guessed that his parents were not to be counted on. One day, perhaps, his writing might bring him in a little money. Alexander, now in Moscow, was writing for various humorous papers. Of course, no serious-minded person would envisage a writing career with a light heart, for it was notoriously a starveling's profession; but he was not thinking so much of a career, as of a means of augmenting whatever he would earn later, just as the bank clerk added to his salary by giving piano lessons. His real profession would not be affected. It was over the choice of this



profession that he hesitated. Then, one hot summer day when he was fifteen, and on a visit to some friends on the steppe, he went swimming in one of the small, icy rivers that meander and disappear in the plains. He fell seriously ill, and on being brought back to Taganrog, lay at death's door with peritonitis. It was the doctor from the Gymnasium, a Russo-German called Strempf, who saved him. During his convalescence, they talked of medicine and the natural sciences, and Anton decided to become a doctor. But first, he must complete his studies at the Taganrog Gymnasium, and already he was beginning to hate provincial life.

## Chapter Nine

**T**AGANROG in the 'seventies bore certain resemblances to any small provincial city in Europe, in that its inhabitants were inquisitive and fond of tittle-tattle, and led narrow, tranquil lives: yet, from time to time, an air of something barbarous and strange passed through it like a breath out of nearby Asia.

From a corner window of the Chekhovs' house could be seen the square where criminals were taken to hear passing of sentence. Preceded by the rolling of a drum, they arrived standing in a cart, hands tied, and wearing a black placard on their breasts. The poor wretches were then tied to the scaffold, and if they were of noble birth, a sword was broken over their heads.

Through a disposition natural to the Russian people, the on-lookers were not so much roused to anger at the crime as filled with compassion for its author. Before the main holidays, the inhabitants of the town used to visit the prison with bread and money which they gave out among the prisoners.

Women were reluctant to venture out alone after nightfall in the unlit streets. Michael Chekhov, Anton's younger brother, going out on the doorstep one evening with the nurse, saw a girl carried off before his eyes. In spite of the unfortunate girl's cries, not a window was opened: she was flung into a carriage, which swept off at a gallop, without anyone dreaming of coming to her aid.

The nurse scratched behind her ear with a knitting-needle, sighed, and said:

'Someone's gone off with a young lady . . . '

Women carried off in that way were sent to Turkish harems. But the authorities and population remained completely indifferent.

In the same town of Taganrog, a few years later, Alexander Chekhov heard a woman shouting in the open street at a boy who had been caught at some mischief or other:

'And what has your aunt done with her three little bastards? Just tell us where she drowned them, eh?'

A policeman, a grave and imposing figure, stood listening with the utmost calm, and without showing the faintest curiosity.

In describing the incident to his family, Alexander closed his letter with the exclamation:

'Isn't that Taganrog all over?'

'People slept in narrow, stuffy rooms, on wooden beds full of vermin; the children's rooms were usually extraordinarily filthy; the servants slept on the floor in the kitchen, and wrapped themselves in rags. The food they ate was tasteless, the water they drank impure.'

It was the custom to stroll up and down the main street, 'the aristocrats (the Greeks) on the left, the democrats on the right'. A vast host of young girls would blossom out in shades of olive or chocolate, if one of them heard the whisper that this was the rage in Moscow. Then brusquely, passing through the crowd of girls in their Paris-style bustles, would appear an open coffin followed by a procession. For that was the way funerals were conducted: the dead man passed through the town for a last time, his countenance exposed, his features gleaming yellow in the sun.

Besides strolling in the main street or the Public Gardens,

watching executions on the square, and going to the theatre, there was one other pleasure in which Taganrog indulged: that was visits to the cemetery, half-religious, half-secular, during which people ate and drank sitting among the tombstones.

All his life, Anton was fond of cemeteries: the village cemeteries round Taganrog, where instead of cypresses, there were cherry trees which in summer let fall their fruit upon the crosses 'like drops of blood'; and later, the cemeteries of Moscow, and those of St. Petersburg, built so close to the Neva that 'the souls of the dead must go down to the river'; and later still, the Tartar cemeteries of the Crimea with their broken steles, and those of Italy and Provence.

'What interested him more than anything else abroad,' wrote his friend Suvorin, 'were cemeteries and circuses.'

## Chapter Ten

WHILE the Chekhovs' house was still being built, the lack of money made itself felt. It was a poky and uncomfortable dwelling: Paul Chekhov had been deceived by everyone, contractors, architects and builders. They had vied with each other in growing fat at his expense. The new owners were reduced to a bare subsistence, and hastened to let all the available rooms. The family had to be content with four rooms, while strangers occupied all the others. For several months, a widow and her two children, a boy and a girl, lived at the Chekhovs'. Anton, then aged fourteen, helped the boy with his lessons, and courted the little girl. They quarrelled as often as they kissed, but it was a form of love, after all: and it was good in the evenings to hide in the shadow of the trees in the courtyard, while the parents were drinking big glasses of tea under the lamplight.

Alexander and Nicholas were both in Moscow. How they lived was a mystery, for they received no money from home. Their mother wept and prayed, but could do nothing to help them. Whenever she spoke to their father about it, he replied coldly that the young wretches must shift for themselves, he had enough worries without thinking of them. If she insisted, he either pretended to be deaf or flew into a rage: Weren't they 18 and 20, those two boobies? Why, at their age, he . . .

Exasperated, the two boys wrote to Anton:

'Tell father', Alexander wrote, 'that he ought to have thought about Kolya's overcoat long ago. We have no money. Mama is perpetually afraid that I'm treating him badly, but she's treating him badly herself by not thinking about buying him an overcoat, while papa concocts his fantastic notions: he wrote telling us to borrow the money from someone for a coat, and with a marten-fur collar at that! He (Kolya) has no boots, and his clothes are falling to pieces. He goes to the School (Nicholas was a pupil at the *Beaux-Arts*) in leaky boots, with snow up to his knees . . . They miss him in Taganrog, yet no one thinks of his predicament. And they all know he's unable to look after himself . . .'  
(*Moscow 1875*).

In Taganrog, they also knew that both boys drank, that neither had their father's head for alcohol, and that 'two or three glasses of wine made them silly'. Nevertheless, with the resigned unconcern of the Slavs, the family left them to their own devices.

'They'll manage,' the family said, and shed a pious tear.

In order to finish his house, Chekhov had obtained an advance of 500 roubles from a local bank. Being unable to repay the loan he ran the risk of arrest and imprisonment, for in those days the debtors' prison still existed in Russia. He fled. There was barely time to bid the family farewell. To avoid being recognised, he did not take the train at Taganrog, but walked to the next station, where, still avoiding scrutiny, he climbed into the carriage and set off for Moscow to rejoin his elder sons. He had no clear idea of what he would do in Moscow; but, just as he had hoped someone would step forward in his place to buy an overcoat for Nicholas, now he thought that 'kind people' or some miracle would intervene in his favour. Meanwhile, he had left his wife in Taganrog, and four children, the eldest, Anton, being 16, and the youngest, 11.

'They'll manage', the father thought, stroking his beard and staring at the steppe through the carriage window.

They managed. They sold silver spoons, shawls, pots and plates.

It was summer, and so hot that they could not sleep in the stifling little rooms. Anton and his brothers rigged up tents in the small garden in front of the house, and spent the night there. Each of the boys had his favourite spot: Anton's was beneath a wild vine that he had planted himself. They woke at dawn, and Anton was entrusted by his mother with buying the provisions. He strode off to the market very solemnly, with his small brother Michael running at his heels. One day he bought a duck, and made it quack all the way home, 'so that everyone will know', he said, 'that we eat duck too'.

The forsaken children, the father fleeing from debtors' prison, remind one of the childhood of Dickens. But poverty and degradation did not make the Russian boy suffer as they did the English. It is certain that Anton never felt the shame that tortured Charles Dickens at the memory of his past. He had less pride and greater simplicity than a person born in the West. He was unhappy, but he did not brood over the subtle causes of his unhappiness, nor add to it the poison of wounded vanity. He did not hide his threadbare clothes or holey boots in embarrassment. Instinctively, he felt that these were not essential, nor even very important, and in no way affected his true dignity. Of that dignity itself, however, he had a handsome and lofty conception.

About that time, Michael wrote to him from Moscow, signing his letter:

'Your insignificant little brother.'

'I don't like it,' Anton wrote back. 'Why do you describe yourself so? You should acknowledge your insignificance only before God.'

There is something comical, and at the same time admirable, in such a lesson in human self-respect, given to a boy of 12 by a youth of 17.

For Michael, by 1877, was in Moscow. A friend of the Chekhovs had promised to look after Paul Egorovich's wife and children and save his house. He saved it all right, but for himself. It was put up for auction, and the friend managed to buy it back: it cost him 500 roubles, and then, without further ado, he evicted the former owners. The poor mother left for Moscow, taking Michael and Marie with her, and abandoning Anton and Ivan. A female relation later took pity on Ivan, and gave him a home. Anton was left on his own.

To be left alone at 16, without resources, with only some vague advice from his parents ('Finish your studies and shift for yourself . . .') in a house which no longer belonged to him, and whose furniture had been sold by public auction—in any other country but Russia, such a situation would have seemed paradoxical and inhuman.

In Russia, it was hard, but bearable: if one did not have a bed, one slept at a friend's place. When there was nothing to eat at home, one dined with others. When summer arrived, one could always spend a month or two with a school friend, and one accompanied him when he in turn went to stay with other friends. In this way, it was possible to take up residence with total strangers, who would not have dreamt for an instant of finding one's presence surprising or out of place. Finally, a youth of 16, in that time and place, was already a grown man, and it was natural that he should earn his living.

Anton came to an arrangement, whereby the new owner of the house was to give him board and lodging in exchange for lessons to be given to his nephew. The latter was a boy of about Anton's age. Anton had been robbed by the uncle: he formed a close friendship with the nephew, and did not seem to feel the



slightest humiliation or bitterness at living between walls which had once been his own, and from which his mother had been driven.

He did not bemoan his fate, but sent encouragements to the family. A number of old pots and pans and jars had been left at the house, and Anton was instructed to sell them. This he did very successfully, and sent the small sum off to his mother accompanied by gay and courageous letters. For he was still able to laugh. Yet, however often he may have felt heavy at heart, perhaps he was not really unhappy. He had never been pampered, and now for the first time in his life he was free. No more father, no more church, no more hateful shop! He no longer felt himself to be a child threatened by the whip, but an adult responsible for his own actions. It was a delicious sensation, and he could really believe that he had made progress.

'I have believed in progress from my childhood,' he wrote later, in that half-joking, half-sad tone he habitually used, 'for the difference between the time when I was punished and the time when I ceased to be punished was immense.'

He was able to spend all his free time at the library, stay late at friends' houses, stroll down to the Public Gardens, and pay court to the young girls. Handsome, sensitive and clever, it was not hard for him to find favour in their eyes. He was more fortunate than his brothers, who had as difficult a life as he did without his independence. The younger ones regarded him with respect, and Michael wrote to him from Moscow to ask what he should read. Anton treated the request with all seriousness and proffered good advice. Michael had wept over *Uncle Tom's Cabin*? Shame on him—it was such an insipid work! Instead, he should read *Don Quixote* . . . There were also some essays of Turgenev, but . . . 'you're not old enough to understand them yet'.

But if his new-found freedom was a great consolation to

Anton, it did not make him unfeeling or indifferent. During his three years of solitude, he grew mature and strengthened himself in mind and body. He was at that age when the adolescent, still bleeding from the wounds of childhood, finds freedom can be acquired only with pain, as if ridding himself of bonds that have bitten into his flesh. It is the age at which one measures what one has suffered, and judges the parents and masters who have caused that suffering.

The judgement Anton passed upon his father was extremely mild. He felt, it is true, and thus he wrote later to his brother Alexander (he did not unburden himself to strangers), that 'his childhood had been so tormented by tyranny and falsehood that it was terrible and repugnant to recall it', but he bore no grudge. It is only the mean of soul who bear grudges. As for his mother, he had always loved her, and she was dearer to him than ever now. He guessed that she had not forgotten him, but that she was worried and overwhelmed with work. He wrote to a cousin living in Moscow, asking him in the most solicitous and tender tone to watch over the poor woman and give her support. 'There is nothing on earth more precious to me than my father and mother!' The mention of his father may have been a polite addition . . . But the mother felt his solicitude, even at that distance.

'Write to Anton,' she said to Alexander, when life became really too hard to bear: 'Write to him. Tell him about me. He alone is sorry for me.'

Anton continued to work assiduously at the school. His marks were higher than ever before. He was reading Spielhagen and Victor Hugo; he was still editing *The Stammerer*, which he sent to his brothers in Moscow; he was writing plays. The theatre still fascinated him. He tried his hand at vaudeville, then at dramas in which horse thieves, young girls being abducted, and trains being attacked all featured in plots of incredible complexity.

During those three years, he paid a visit of several weeks to Moscow, and Taganrog seemed doubly poor and squalid on his return. What boredom settled over the town in the summer evenings, over those deserted streets full of the odour of horse-dung and dust and roses, the ubiquitous atmosphere of the Russian provinces. Lights began to appear at the windows. This was the hour when every household began to drink the evening tea, exchanging the same stale bits of news, yawning, playing listlessly at cards, slowly stuffing themselves with heavy foods, on and on until two or three in the morning, as if the effort of getting from one's chair to one's bed were above human strength. And at that same hour in Moscow, carriages were skimming along broad streets, between pavements thronged with people. There were theatres and concerts. The women were beautiful and intelligent. 'Ah, Moscow, Moscow!' He did not dream of conquering the capital—he was marvellously devoid of ambition. All he demanded was food for his heart and imagination. He needed someone to admire: in Moscow there were university professors, writers, scholars and scientists, and these were the people he wanted to know. He needed someone to love. He followed with disabused eye 'the young ladies of Taganrog, who went by smiling with a great deal of coquetry. Some of them were pretty, but so affected, so narrow; their talk was vulgar, and their thoughts worse'. Poor 'young ladies of Taganrog'—Anton did them less than justice. But the young man did not want to bewitch or dominate but to respect. And who was there to respect in that moribund town? It came to the point when he even began to respect his Uncle Mitrofan. They had often laughed at him, he and his brothers, when they were children. Mitrofan was a merchant, like Paul Egorovich, and the rich relation of the family: it was to him they addressed their entreaties when things went wrong. Addicted to sermonizing, he was a terrible bore with his good advice, his moral precepts, and

his smug tone, but with all that, sincerely pious and charitable. However ignorant, superstitious and ridiculous he might be, Mitrofan was the only man in Taganrog worthy of respect in Anton's eyes: which showed what the rest were like! . . .

He dreamed constantly of leaving, but there was nothing he could do but be patient and win the diploma which would allow him to enter Moscow University.

When he was tired of the Public Gardens, he went to the outskirts of Taganrog; but these were no more inviting than the town itself. On the seashore was a village called the 'Quarantine Station', in memory of an outbreak of plague in very early times, when the inhabitants of Taganrog had been driven to seek refuge there. In recent times, a number of villas had been built. Rich people had estates on the steppe, or in Ukraine: the poorer middle-class people had to be content with the 'Quarantine Station' during the hot weather. 'There is a small, bare coppice. It is four versts from the town, with a good easy road all the way. On the way, you have the blue sea on your left, and on your right, the bleak, unending steppe. . . .'

In a small building with heavy, graceless columns by the seashore, Anton dreamed alone, or passed the time with girls. On the sand of the beach, 'the little waves murmured tenderly'. The columns were covered up to a man's height with names scribbled in pencil or carved with a pocket-knife. Perhaps the names of Anton Chekhov and of some unknown young girl remained there side by side for a time, before being effaced by the rain, or covered over with other naïve and clumsily wrought emblems.

In the same house by the sea, he met old friends, and while they plunged with innocent zeal into political discussions and produced the inflammatory doctrines that their age and the fashion of the day dictated, Anton listened with lowered head, saying nothing: all his life he preferred listening to talking.

At last the summer holidays arrived, and Anton once more travelled out on to the steppe. He spent the time with friends, a month here, a month there. While travelling, he slept sometimes in the carriage, sometimes in a dilapidated inn, at one of those relay posts where merchants and sometimes horse-thieves put up for the night.

As soon as the snows melted, the plain was covered with fresh green verdure, but it was soon burned and withered by sun and wind, so that often by the end of May, nothing was left but brittle yellow stalks: all was consumed—the fresh anemones, the delicate pink blossoms of the wild peach, and the field flowers transplanted by storms and swept across the steppe on the wings of the wind.

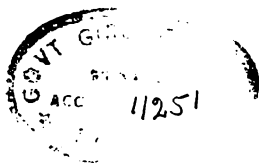
The stretches of plain were so vast that, after having gladdened the soul with a sense of freedom, they overwhelmed it with their monotonous silence. It was a land without mountains or forests, where the birds were hushed, the flowers dead, and the infrequent streams swallowed up in the parched earth, lacking the vigour to run down to the sea.

On many estates, life was primitive and almost Asiatic still. It was while staying on such an estate that Anton learned to ride and hunt. The dogs, which were not fed but had to find their own prey, were more like wolves than domestic animals. Even the farmyard fowls were brought down with a gun. It was not the same as being in Moscow, but certainly a pleasanter life than dreary Taganrog could offer.

One day when Anton was out walking alone, he discovered a well on the steppe. He went up to it, and stood for a long time gazing at his reflection in the water. It was a calm, blazing hot day, and the sky appeared 'extraordinarily deep and transparent', as it does when it rears in a vast dome, untroubled by any cloud, over the bare plain. The silence was complete. Suddenly the figure of a woman appeared, coming with a bucket

to draw water at the well. When she came nearer, Anton saw it was a young girl; she was perhaps fifteen, and very pretty. . . . Her naked feet trampled the tall grass. She rested her bucket on the curbstone. They did not speak, nor even look at one another, but in the still water, each saw a smile creep over the other's face. Without a word, Anton drew the young peasant girl to him, and began to fondle and kiss her. She made no attempt to escape; she said nothing, but only closed her eyes, like all the loved women in the world; her lips parted, not for cries or laughter, but eager only for kisses. Time went by, and they were afraid of being discovered: they loosened their embrace, yet could not draw apart. He took her hand, and both, still without a word, leaned over the well. Reflected there, the sun seemed darkened to a black silver disc floating in an ashen sky. But it was late, and the girl had to return to her village. Silently she left, holding in her hand the bucket she had forgotten to fill.

A few months later, Anton left Taganrog for Moscow: his childhood had already been left far behind.



## Chapter Eleven

IN Moscow in 1876, Anton Chekhov's family (his father and mother, four brothers and young sister: he himself, at 16, was finishing his studies at the secondary school in his native Taganrog) were living in the manner indicated by the following letter.

*From Alexander Chekhov to his brother Anton:*

'Moscow, 27th September, 1876.

'Our affairs are going very badly. . . . We have spent all our money. We borrowed ten roubles from Misha Chekhov (this was a cousin living in Moscow), but that too has now been used up. . . . There is no news, just the same old troubles. There's nothing left to pawn.'

Their bankrupt shopkeeper father, who had escaped debtor's prison by the skin of his teeth, was looking for work, but the days went by and he found nothing. For all that:

'We go every single day to church,' Alexander wrote with irony 'and having been formerly in business, we go to the Stock Exchange, where we listen to the latest views on the Serbian war and then, as usual, return home without having found anything.'

'Home' was certainly a sad and squalid place. The Chekhovs moved from lodging to lodging, finding each one too dear. They were stranded finally in veritable hovels—living in one room

with a garret. Here, dirt and confusion reigned. They gave shelter to a dog, to some birds, then to an aged relative, who slept with them in the same room. Their Russian sloth and negligence emphasised the air of poverty. In his letters to Anton, Alexander gave a vivid picture of the life they led: he described their mother, dressed in an old man's overcoat, chopping wood, carrying heavy pails of water, and continually in tears. Marie, who was 13, worked as a servant. The youngest one, little Michael, could not go to the secondary school, as there was no money to pay the fees. Alexander and Nicholas, the two eldest boys, had to share their meagre wages with their parents: they gave a few lessons, and contributed to small illustrated papers. Nicholas was lazy and a drunkard. Alexander had seduced a married woman, who played him the nasty trick of leaving her husband. He thus found himself without means, with a mistress and her son on his hands. All this gave rise to quarrels between Alexander and his parents, accompanied by endless cries and lamentations. It was a sorry state of affairs indeed. 'The cries of the beaten, and the uproar of those doing the beating,' wrote Alexander, 'smoke, confusion, discomfort . . .'

'Moscow, 27th February, 1877.

'Our parents are astonishing people. Never once has either of them asked me whether I had money, how I got hold of it, whether I earned it, or whether I have much or little. It is of no interest to them. All they know is that every month, on a certain day, they will receive five roubles from me: but on top of that, eight times a month they borrow from me . . .'

The father found consolation in reading aloud to his family sermons which he bought from the verger.

'Everyone listens, and only the painter (Nicholas) from time to time gives his model a cuff, and cries: "Heavens above, Mishka, when will you learn to hold a pose? Turn to three-quarters' profile!"'



“‘Quiet, heathens!’” father growls.

‘Silence is re-established. The reading over, the sermon is hung up on a nail and marked with a number, the date, and the inscription: “Price—one silver kopeck. God be praised”.’

Poverty did not prevent them from getting drunk. The Chekhovs had relations in Moscow, shop assistants and small shopkeepers. ‘Their moral conviction remains the same: if one drinks, one dies, and if one doesn’t drink, one dies. So it is better to drink.’ (*Letter from Alexander to Anton, Moscow, 23rd November, 1877*).

‘Often in the evenings, the Chekhovs of both sexes gather together . . .’ (*Moscow, March, 1877*).

The table was covered ‘with an incalculable number of bottles’. While they drank, they sang the church songs ‘which please the ear and touch the soul’. Drunk and happy and deeply moved, the men kissed each other on the mouth in the Russian fashion. The ladies, meanwhile, ‘forgetting idle everyday cares, talked . . . of bustles and bodices, etc. . . .’

Then the entire family went to bed on a vast mattress on the floor—father, mother and children all pell-mell, a female cousin as well, and Michael with the dog.

‘One might as well be a convict’, Alexander exclaimed, ‘as live with them.’

The father, Paul Egorovich, finally obtained a book-keeping job, but he did not keep it for long. For—‘They give me a document’, he complained, ‘and I don’t know what to write: they tell me, but while I’m going back to my desk, I forget it all.’

‘I can no longer work for my family,’ he said to Alexander one day.

‘When I wanted to know what he had done up to now for his family,’ Alexander wrote, ‘what work he had accomplished and what difficult affairs he had looked after, he replied: “Consider the birds of the air. They sow not, neither do they reap,

and they store up nothing in the granaries . . . and yet your heavenly Father feeds them''. '

He would have liked to be supported by his sons. 'Papa and mama must eat', he would often say in a solemn tone, caressing his large beard. Many times later, Anton repeated that phrase with a smile. When he was ill, when others insisted he should rest, or said that he was writing too much, because no true artist could produce at that rate, and that he should have more respect for his art and be more patient, he would reply sadly and humorously: 'But papa and mama must eat, you know.'

But if Paul Egorovich refused to support his children, he had no intention of renouncing the paternal authority 'which comes from God'. One day the family were astonished to find, hung on the wall beneath the holy ikons, a daily curriculum drawn up and inscribed with careful flourishes by Paul Egorovich for their edification. Thanks to Alexander, the text still survives:

Rules for the conduct and domestic duties of the family of Paul Chekhov, residing in Moscow. In which is examined and decreed at what hour they shall rise, retire, eat, go to church, and in what manner employ their leisure time:

*From 5 to 7 o'clock in the evening*

Nicholas Chekhov, 20 years: supervision and indoor conduct.

Ivan Chekhov, 17 years: domestic supervision according to the rule above!?

(Alexander added: This is the punctuation used in the original text, and expresses the extreme astonishment of the author himself.)

Chekhov, Michael, 11 years:

Chekhov, Marie, 14 years:

Attendance at Church: Service at 7, mass at 6.30 and at 9.30 on holidays.

*Remarks:* Approved by Paul Chekhov, father. Those who do not obey these rules strictly will be severely reprimanded at first, and after that, punished: it is forbidden to cry out during punishment.

*Signed:* Paul Chekhov, father.

Chekhov, Michael, 11 years, was the first to receive punishment. Grounds for punishment: he was eight minutes late getting up. On another occasion, Ivan received such a cruel beating that the neighbours, wakened by his cries, protested. At once, Paul Egorovich abandoned his role of educator, and the rules were seen no more. In an obscure way, he sensed that his children were beginning to judge him and to rise in revolt. What did Anton think of it all? He knew that Alexander deliberately exaggerated his father's brutality and ignorance, and added some comic touches to reality. But the picture was fundamentally true: these were his parents, this the home and the existence that awaited him in Moscow. We do not know what he wrote to the family at that time: all Anton's letters, between 1876 and 1878, were lost in the perpetual family moves—in three years, the Chekhovs changed their lodgings eleven times—or were used to light the fire. As for Alexander himself, when it came to the point, he showed little interest in Anton. He wrote to him to complain of their parents, to ask him for small favours ('Send me some tobacco: the kind that costs one rouble in Taganrog costs two in Moscow'), to pass love letters on to former lady friends: but he never asked his brother how he was managing to exist. Only once did he make a reference to Anton's difficulties—and then it was merely: 'According to your last letter, you're not having a very brilliant time! Don't worry, things will turn out all right!'

In the meantime, their father had at last found a job in a goods depot, for which he was paid 30 roubles a month and given

lodging. The Chekhovs were well content: now they had a little money coming in, and were rid of the father, who no longer slept at the house and appeared only on Sundays. Everyone breathed more freely.

## Chapter Twelve

**A**NTON CHEKHOV was 19 when he arrived in Moscow. He was poorly dressed, in a tight-fitting suit which he could scarcely button up, and wearing a ridiculous hat that was much too small for him. But college was over at last. Now he was a student: he had already entered his name at the Faculty of Medicine. He was no longer constrained by strict college discipline, and as a sign of independence had allowed his hair to grow long and curl in profusion over his neck. A faint moustache had appeared beneath his straight, slender nose. His face was very much that of the Russian peasant: a Christlike countenance, with deep and tender gaze, but with a humorous twist to the lips.

At that time his family were living in a damp basement, underneath a church. All that was visible from the windows was the roadway and the feet of passers-by. Within, all was obscurity and dank, heavy odours. But Anton was overjoyed at seeing his family again, and above all at being in Moscow. He had not come alone: two friends from Taganrog were to live with him; and through taking in these lodgers, the Chekhovs were able to eat a little better, and to make a further move to a more pleasant apartment. It was the district of tolerated houses, but the young man was not particular about that. Full of hope and vigour, he looked to a better future. He would manage. 'I will be rich',

he said, 'as surely as two and two make four.' Yet he was neither vain nor grasping. Wealth for him meant only one thing: having enough to eat every day, being able to provide for his family, and above all, leading a more tranquil and dignified existence. Of all the Chekhovs, he alone felt an inner urge, a desire for a better way of life.

Alexander and Nicholas had left the household. The father could not be counted on. Anton thus found himself the eldest, the real head, and straight away (although half unconsciously) embarked upon that education of his family and of himself which continued right up to his death.

'That's not the way to behave,' he told the astonished Michael; 'it's bad to lie, to steal, to answer your mother back, and be cruel to animals.'

But it was not so much his words—for no one was less given to sermonising than Anton—that inspired respect, but the example he set. He was always courteous, serene, gay and even-tempered.

Slowly the family fortunes improved. All the Chekhov children were brilliantly gifted. Alexander wrote, Nicholas drew. Ivan was a schoolmaster, who would soon be able to support himself. Even Michael earned small sums by copying out university courses for the students. Anton was to be a doctor. The timid and nervous Marie, who adored her brother, was growing into a 'fine young woman'. Life became easier, and in spite of all their cares, brought something like happiness.

The young people all had friends between 18 and 20, and used to meet in each other's homes, but most often at the Chekhovs', since poverty never prevented anyone in Russia from keeping open house. Anton's friends who lodged in the house paid 20 roubles a month, which improved the daily fare. There were beds in every room. Everyone laughed and sang in chorus, read aloud and wrote as well. Alexander had managed to get several

stories into illustrated papers, and Nicholas had sold caricatures. There was nothing to stop Anton doing the same. In 1880, a little humorous paper called *The Cicada*, published the *Letter from a Landowner of the Don to his Neighbour*, which is undoubtedly the first of Anton Chekhov's literary work to appear in print. It was a modest beginning, and his only ambition then was to earn a little money from time to time. He wrote with ease—'half mechanically' he himself said later. He tried his stories on every illustrated periodical and every satirical paper in Moscow. To none of them did he sign his real name, but chose a pseudonym: 'Antosha Chekhonta'. His brothers and friends wrote as he did, as a diversion, and tried like him to make their stories 'short and humorous'. From time to time a story appeared, but there was many a setback, many a manuscript rejected with brutal disdain. No one thought of sparing the feelings of a humble and poorly-dressed student, himself convinced of his ignorance and lack of talent. Often the manuscript he had brought would not even be read:

'Call that a story? Why, it's not as long as a sparrow's beak!'

While on another occasion the young writer might receive the response:

'It's too long! Insipid!'

To which the speaker would add:

'A person can't write if he hasn't the critical sense to judge his own work.'

Without losing heart, Anton would burn the story and write another. There was something prodigious about the facility with which he wrote. Gradually he adapted his work to the taste of the readers, and more and more of it appeared in print. It has been calculated that nine of his stories appeared in 1880, thirteen in 1881, and so on, with a regular increase in output each year, until 1885, when he reached his maximum. In that year, he achieved the total of 129 stories, sketches or articles.

But seeing his work in print was not everything. It was more important—and more difficult—to get paid. The small journals to which he contributed lived from hand to mouth, and were periodically on the verge of bankruptcy. He had to beg and cajole and threaten in order to obtain a few kopecks, and then there were many rebuffs and hours of futile waiting.

‘Sometimes we all go to the editorial office of the paper, in a crowd, so that it won’t be so tiresome . . . ‘Is the editor in?’ ‘He’s in. He says will you wait.’ . . . So we wait for an hour, two hours: then we lose patience and begin beating on the walls and door. At last some fellow comes in sleepily, with feathers in his hair, and asks in astonishment: ‘What do you want?’ ‘Where’s the editor?’ ‘He went out a long time ago: he left by the kitchen.’ ‘Didn’t he leave anything for us?’ ‘He said to come back another day’.’

Young Michael was often charged by his brothers with running from one editorial office to another. Perhaps it was a debt of three roubles he had to collect . . .

‘Three roubles,’ the editor would reply. ‘I haven’t got them! Where am I to get them from? Would you like a ticket to the theatre? Or a new pair of trousers? You can go to such-and-such a tailor and order some trousers. Tell him to put them on my bill.’

It was a patriarchal society.

But at least, one might think, Anton found some pleasure in inventing and writing his stories: but even this was not the case. He wrote hastily, finding it tedious, mindful only of the fact that he must not exceed the number of lines demanded by the paper. He had no confidence in himself. As a child, he had had modesty driven into him by cuffs and blows. He could not rid himself of the feeling of inferiority and humility which he had felt both at home and at school. But it did not make him suffer, for he found it quite natural. That he, Anton Chekhov, should possess



talent was unthinkable. His stories were 'stupid trifles'. They were weak, it is true: the style was heavy, the humour often laboured, the invention extravagant: and yet . . . In a few lines, in half a page, the true Chekhov appeared, with his sad, gentle smile. This melancholy evocation was written in 1882:

'The first snowfall came, then the second and third, and now the long winter has begun, with its glacial cold . . . I do not like the winter, and I do not believe those who say they do. With its magical moonlight nights, its troikas and hunting parties, its concerts and balls, winter soon fills us with boredom; it lasts too long; it has brought to grief more than one homeless sick creature . . . ' (*Late Flowers*, 1882.)

## Chapter Thirteen

ALL the papers to which Anton contributed had an ephemeral existence. Few humorous journals at that period could claim a wide public or an assured success. Nevertheless, there was one that had many readers: this was Nicholas Alexandrovich Leykin's paper, published in St. Petersburg, called *Oskolki* (*Fragments*). Leykin was himself a writer of some repute, filled with his own importance as publisher and author. He set great store by his paper, and was continually on the look-out for gifted and poor young writers who would supply him with brilliant contributions at a cheap rate. In St. Petersburg, writers were spoilt and exacting. It seemed to Leykin that he would find what he wanted more easily in Moscow. Thus it happened that one winter's day in 1882, having lunched well and lit an excellent cigar, he began telling a friend, as they drove off in a sledge together, of the difficulties of his profession, of the pretensions of youth, and of his desire to find a modest and intelligent associate. It was still daylight in the snow-covered streets. Leykin's friend listened and absent-mindedly surveyed the passers-by. Suddenly he noticed two shabbily dressed young men, and signalled to them.

'Who's that?' Leykin asked.

'Two brothers called Chekhov, Anton and Nicholas. One

draws, the other writes short stories. He published a very charming little thing just recently.'

'They might be useful to me,' Leykin exclaimed.

The sledge stopped and the two men got out. It was too bitterly cold to stand talking for long in the street. Leykin, his friend and the Chekhovs went into a nearby tavern, where beer was called for.

'Can you let me have stories and drawings?' Leykin asked.

What a question to ask! They wrote and drew with such ease: Anton in particular was so sure of himself. Nicholas promised everything anyone asked, but he was too lazy to finish his caricatures and deliver them on the due date. Those around him felt he was squandering the most indisputable gifts, and neglecting his future: but no doubt Nicholas himself, already far gone with tuberculosis, sensed that his future would be brief. It was a very different matter with Anton. He was not afraid of hard work, and as his gaze lingered on the estimable M. Leykin, a writer already well known and acclaimed, ambition at last awoke within him. After all, perhaps he too might some day win comparable renown.

He replied joyously that he could send M. Leykin four or five stories right away.

'They're short, I hope? And amusing? That's all the public wants. The censorship's always on the alert. Avoid serious topics. As long as it's light, humorous, lively and fast-moving . . .'

Anton agreed to everything. Life was wonderful. And how much would he be paid?

'Eight kopecks a line. Four to five roubles a story.'

It was liberal indeed.

'Then you can send us some sketches, farces . . .'

Anton thought of all the manuscripts that had been refused . . . This was a godsend! For Alexander too. For mentally he made no distinction between his own fate and that of the family. It

was not enough that Nicholas was sharing his good fortune. He had to think also of the eldest, now absent from Moscow.

'I'll write to him tomorrow,' Anton reflected, 'and tell him to send some stories of 50 to 80 lines. He must write five or ten straight away . . .' Why not? Writing was as easy as speaking or breathing. Young Chekhov was daunted by nothing: if need be, he would fill the scene with Hungarian aristocrats and the 'Parisian demi-monde' —all without ever having set foot outside Russia, without having met anyone other than students and merchants, and the ordinary people of Moscow. What did it matter? Anything pleased the public. 'The Moscow public has no taste and no culture!'

Suddenly, Chekhov turned to Leykin:

'Could you give me one of your books? I would really treasure it. I'd have it bound.'

Leykin, flattered by this attention, promised with a smile. Anton felt happier than ever. The new friends separated.

'There's some real work for us,' Anton said gaily to his brother, as soon as they were alone.

For the first time in his life, he had a feeling of pride, not in his own stories but in the paper in which they would appear. He wrote to Alexander:

'I must tell you that *Fragments* is the paper of the hour . . . Everyone reads it . . . I am justified now in looking down on the other papers.' Of course, he would have to work harder. Up to now, he had not even taken the trouble to make fair copies of his manuscripts. But he would do that, and even remodel them, if necessary. All he lacked was time and a quiet room: and peace of mind. He was twenty-two, and he still had to borrow five or ten roubles from those around him for a coat or a pair of boots. But all that would end, as soon as he was a doctor. Literature was merely a pastime. His true vocation lay elsewhere. Thus, in a

<sup>1</sup> *A Useless Victory*, 1882.

crowded dining-room, hearing his brothers and friends laughing and talking around him, himself joining in the laughter and drinking big glasses of tea, Chekhov wrote his first stories on a corner of the table.

He also acted as a reporter for Leykin, and found it an amusing assignment. He was curious about everything. Theatres, trials, casual scenes in street or shop, burglaries, inquests—all these gave him material for his stories, and added to his experience. Young as he was, he had already seen a great many of the diverse types that flourished in the vast Russian land. In Taganrog, it was shopkeepers, priests, schoolmasters, peasants and sailors: in Moscow, merchants, government officials, the lower middle classes and humbler townsmen, students, shop assistants, coachmen, porters. In 1883 his brother Ivan received a teaching appointment in a small town near Moscow, and the Chekhovs spent the summer there. Anton got to know soldiers on garrison duty and provincial young ladies. A short time later, he worked in a hospital, and here met further types. There was a monastery not far from the town, which Anton used to visit to talk to the monks. People, situations and events which to others might have appeared insignificant or barely worthy of notice, filled him with interest: he could create a world in a nutshell. A writer one day remarked in his presence that it was difficult to find themes for short stories.

'What's that?' Chekhov exclaimed. 'I write about anyone and about anything . . .'

His eyes sparkled. He glanced about him, looking for some object, and seized upon an ashtray.

'Look at this, for example. Tomorrow I'll write a story called *The Ashtray*. Would you like me to?'

Young, ardent, gay, with a questing spirit, he looked on the world with the sole desire of finding in it material for humorous stories. That was what the public wanted. If he occasionally

chose some serious or melancholy theme, he had to apologise for it to the editor: 'It seems to me', he wrote, 'that a serious little tale of about a hundred lines will not be too ill-received' (literally: 'will not put the public's eyes out'), but he himself felt that he must be careful, that although they might pardon him once, what they really wanted, now and in the future, was humour. It was a pity, because in the long run the necessity of making people laugh was a heavy mental strain, and aroused an indefinable sadness in the depths of his heart. Nevertheless, the Chekhov of those early years would have liked nothing better than to treat life as a gentle, smiling friend, sharing his laughter with it: but . . . To write, even if it were only 'stupid trifles', he had to look about him and observe reality: and the reality was sad and ugly enough. With deceived husbands (*One cannot do two things at once*, 1880), brutal and ignorant parents (*Papa*, 1880), senseless marriages (*Before the Wedding*, 1880), oppressed peasants (*For some Apples*, 1880), the laughter often ended in a wry grimace. But people went on laughing. What more was needed?

## Chapter Fourteen

THE immense majority of Russians in the 'sixties desired the abolition of serfdom and the introduction of social reforms, and hoped for a better future. It was thought that all evils arose from the serfdom of the *mouzhik*. By dint of being pitied, the Russian peasant had come to be regarded as a paragon, an ideal. Instead of seeing in him an ordinary man who, although disfigured by centuries of misfortune, was neither better nor worse than other men, the Russian 'intelligentsia' was determined at all costs to see in an Ivan or Dmitri, with bare feet and dirty beard, a prophet and a saint. Serfdom had at last been abolished: and the peasant stood revealed as an ignorant brute, as capable of cruelty or cowardice as his masters. In spite of the liberation, he was as wretched as before. The nobles, for their part, were half ruined. The *zemstva* (or rural administrative bodies) functioned with difficulty. Corruption among officials—that ancient and eternal curse of Russia—was the same as in Gogol's day. Since the assassination of 1st March, 1881, reaction had become all-powerful, and at times recalled the worst days of the reign of Nicholas I. The main features of Russian society in the 'eighties and 'nineties were a stupid censorship and a barbaric morality, with government and revolutionaries matching each other for cruelty in attack and repression. People sank into apathy and indifference.

There had been so many noble and generous dreams, so many lives sacrificed, and all to what end? People as a whole were disgusted with politics and social reforms. The workers alone still struggled, but they remained far removed from the 'intelligentsia'. The latter, disappointed in the *mouzhik*, knew nothing of the worker, and would probably have feared him if they had. From a distance and, with our present knowledge of what the years concealed, how pathetic appear the disillusionment and apathy of the privileged class when it was doomed to such a terrible end!

Then, as always, people sought a justification for living. We do not need to dwell here on Marxism, which proved so attractive to the young: its fruits only appeared much later. In the 'eighties, three tendencies exerted their sway over Russian thought.

The first was towards resignation and the practice of private virtues. ('Don't look for midday at two in the afternoon', was a saying which expressed this view. 'What is the use of vast reforms? Let each one do his best in his own modest sphere. Give food to the hungry, build a school or a hospital, be honest and compassionate, and that is sufficient.') The second was towards extreme individualism (the theory of art for art's sake). The third was the urge to self-perfection, which Tolstoy had made the fashion.

Unhappily, none of these concepts were fully satisfying to 'men of good will'. Russia was so vast and so wretched that 'private virtues' were inevitably dwarfed. What good could building one school do—or even ten or a hundred—when there were millions of illiterates? Why feed the inhabitants of a single village or town, when the rest of Russia was dying of hunger? How remain honest—and to what purpose?—in a country where everyone stole, from the smallest to the greatest? But individualism, on careful reflection, proved to be no better: unless one



were a heartless brute, it was not possible to forget the sufferings of thousands of innocents. What then remained? The perfecting of the self and the search for truth, as Tolstoy preached? His theory exerted a great influence over people's minds, but even it could not procure happiness. The men of the 'eighties were morose and uneasy, devoured by scruples and regrets, by pangs of shadowy remorse, and strange forebodings.

Yet it would be difficult to imagine a period more in contrast to our own. The people of those days seem happy to us. They knew nothing of the evils with which we are afflicted. They wanted freedom. They did not experience the tyranny which hovers over us. It is impossible not to envy them, when one thinks of them in their huge dwellings, knowing nothing of wars except the remote struggle with Turkey on the confines of the empire, troubled only by agrarian unrest and strikes instead of the revolutions of our own day. And yet they were sincerely and profoundly unhappy—perhaps more so than us, since they did not know the causes of their suffering. Evil reigned then as now: it had not assumed its apocalyptic, present-day guise, but the spirit of violence, cowardice and corruption was everywhere. Then as now, the world was divided into blind executioners and passive victims; but everything was paltry, narrow, steeped in mediocrity. All that was needed was a writer who would talk of this mediocrity without anger and without disgust, but with the pity it deserved.

Literature at that time exerted a great influence over people's minds. But it was neither a brilliant distraction nor pure aesthetic satisfaction that an idle, cultured and well-bred public sought, but a doctrine. The Russian writer was, in the best sense of the term, a teacher. The question he had to answer was not the implicit one of the European reader, 'What are we?' but the anguished interrogation, 'What must we become?' Each tried to answer after his own fashion. *The Brothers Kara-*

*mazov* had just appeared. Saltykov-Shchedrin was writing *The Golovlyov Family*. It was the period of Turgenev's last, melancholy, perfect stories. Tolstoy was a king, a god. And among all these great men, revered by the whole of Russia, Anton Chekhov, a modest young man whose only thought was to earn a living, was writing his first stories.

## Chapter Fifteen

IT was one o'clock in the morning, in the month of August, and Anton was writing. At night in a Russian house, no one was in a hurry to go to bed. They had lingered long over the evening tea: friends passing beneath the windows and noticing the light had climbed the stairs, and showed no sign of going. Old Chekhov was reading aloud from a newspaper article which particularly pleased him. He was able to read like that for hours without getting tired; but only his wife was listening. Anton's young brothers were laughing and talking among themselves. Someone turned the handle of the musical box, and the refrain from *La Belle Hélène* mingled with the cries of a child from the next room. This was Alexander's child. Alexander himself slept in Anton's bed. Anton would find a bed wherever he could. Russian hospitality is boundless.

Alexander had at last freed himself from his first mistress, only to plunge almost at once into domesticity again. He had again chosen a married woman, this time a Jewess. He had found a position in the Taganrog customs. ('My brother Alexander is a humorist', Anton wrote. 'He joined the Taganrog customs when everything had already been stolen . . .') Poor Alexander! Debts and drunkenness made his life a hell. When he was not drinking, he was gay, witty and charming, a gentle companion and an honest man. But one glass of wine was enough to make him lose his head. He borrowed money from

his family, from his friends, from strangers, and never paid a farthing back. He sank deeper into debt, and told everyone his misfortunes. The woman he had picked up in the gutter, for Heaven knows what chivalrous or sentimental reasons—he himself did not know whether it was from love or from the emptiness of his own existence—had now become hateful to him. He cursed and sometimes beat her. He snivelled; he lied; he claimed that he loved his children, but he neglected them and whipped them. Nicholas was no better: his mistress and Alexander's were sisters. Nicholas also drank, and coughed up blood. But he was seen less frequently than Alexander, who, as soon as things became too difficult, gathered together his wife and children and the servant, his furniture and baskets of linen, and came to Moscow. Here they all settled down with Anton and lived at his expense.

In spite of the musical box, the monotonous voice of his father, and the cries of the sick child, Anton was writing. But that night Alexander was more miserable than usual. He felt he had to pour out his woes to someone and receive their consolation, and who would listen better than Anton? Yawning and groaning, he entered his brother's room, and talked to him for a long time about the baby. 'Of course she has a stomach-ache. That's why she's crying'—since Anton was a medical student, he could always be asked for free advice. Then began the eternal sighs and complaints. He had ruined his life. He had brought it on himself, it was true, but no one took pity on him, and no one understood him. He spoke of his own and his wife's ill health, of his boredom, of the emptiness of his existence, of his insolent or servile companions, of life in general, of morals, politics and God. Anton listened with resignation. The cries of the child reached such a pitch they even drowned the old man's voice, the refrain from *La Belle Hélène*, and the eternal *razgovors* in the living-room. 'Oh, to have a quiet room,'

Anton thought, 'a corner to oneself . . .' He had pushed aside the page he had begun: Alexander would not leave him until dawn. While his brother was talking, Anton put the few finished stories into an envelope, addressed it to Leykin, and scribbled the following note:

'The stories in this bunch are failures. The writing is feeble and the pieces are too short. I have a better subject, and I should have liked to write more, but this time, fate is against me.'  
(*Moscow, August 1883.*)

In the summer, the Chekhovs left Moscow. Taking Nicholas' drawings and Anton's files of papers, the samovar, the jars of preserves, the household pots and pans, father, mother and children set off. What they sought was a cheap little spot in the neighbourhood of the city, and in 1885 they rented a house on an estate called Babkino. The owner's mansion stood at one end of the park, the Chekhovs' dwelling, a long, low wooden building, at the other.

They arrived at the beginning of spring:

'It is now six o'clock in the morning. Our hosts are asleep . . . The silence is extraordinary . . . When we arrived, it was already one o'clock at night . . . The doors of the villa were not shut . . . Without waking our hosts, we came in, lit the lamp, and found something which surpassed all our expectations, huge rooms . . . And more furniture than we need . . . As soon as we were settled, I tidied my suitcases, and sat down to have a bite to eat. I drank a little vodka and a little wine, and . . . you know, it was fine to look through the window at the darkening trees and the river . . . I heard a nightingale singing, and could not believe my ears . . . '

It was May 10th, 1885, and he was writing to his brother Michael, who had remained in Moscow. In his correspondence, he did not like talking of things that lay near to his heart. And his love of nature was one of those profound emotions which

remained unexpressed except in literature. In literature, of course, it was different. Then one was addressing an unseen and mythical monster—the public—and not one's young brother Michael, who had been the sceptical onlooker of one's early efforts, and knew how often the song of the nightingale, the 'darkening trees', and the river had been pressed into service to earn a few pence! But on that night, Anton was very happy. His worries were fading away, most of all the worry over money. 'It is hard, having to pay out 25 roubles in one go' (1883). 'I have escaped from Moscow and from birthdays which cost me far more than any travelling' (1884). 'I have no money. *The Petersburg Gazette* has not sent anything yet. *Entertainment* still owes me several trifles. I cannot hope to get more than ten roubles from the *Alarm-Clock* . . .' (1884). There had been family worries: 'Nicholas is ill and earns very little. Alexander is useless' (1884). And worries about his own health: the year before, he had felt ill one day, and had spat blood. 'There is something ominous in these haemorrhages, like the flames of a conflagration.'

For a moment, he had trembled. He did not want to die. Life was sweet. There were so many charming things—pretty women (for he loved beauty, being no ascetic but the most human of men), nature, lazy walks, books, the theatre, friendship. Could a handkerchief flecked with blood mean death? He did not seek an escape through submissiveness, nor through his pride or his knowledge or any Western virtue, but through that Slav laziness which consists in stationing oneself before the truth and regarding it fixedly for a long time, without any attempt to flee, merely gazing so long that its contours become blurred, until it merges into a kind of mist, dissolves and disappears. It did not occur to him to take treatment or to change his way of life. 'I have had a haemorrhage,' he wrote to his family, 'but it was not tubercular.'

That night, he did not want even to think of it. He had several weeks' respite before him. He would bathe in the river: he would go fishing, for the streams were well stocked with fish. The proprietors of Babkino, the Kisselevs, seemed charming. In spite of the disparity of class, they showed no trace of haughtiness towards the Chekhovs. 'She (Madame Kisselev) has given my mother a jar of jam,' Anton wrote. 'She is extraordinarily nice.' In short, the future looked bright enough. He had just that year completed his medical studies. Unfortunately, he had too many friends: they were always ready to come and stay, but none of them thought of paying. People wrote to him even from the country. It was flattering, but scarcely remunerative, to give consultations such as this by post:

'What is the matter with Onoufry Ivanovich's little girl? My mother did tell me, but I could not make much sense out of it. Bath her in salt water every morning (a spoonful of salt to a tub containing one or two buckets of water).'

Then, struck by a scruple, he had added:

'However, your doctors know more about it than I do.'

Of all the thoughts that passed through his mind on that May night, in the silence of the sleeping house, there was certainly one which did not come near to trouble him. That was the thought of fame. How far off it still was! And yet . . .

## Chapter Sixteen

*Letter from Grigorovich to Chekhov—*

*St. Petersburg, 25th March, 1886.*

**M**OST honoured Anton Pavlovich!  
'About a year ago, I read by chance your story in *The St. Petersburg Gazette*; I cannot for the moment recall its title; I remember only that I was struck by the indications of a quite outstanding originality and, above all, by a remarkable accuracy, by the truthfulness of the descriptions of people and of nature.

'From that day on, I read everything which bore the signature Chekhonta, although I was inwardly vexed at a man who held so poor an opinion of himself as to consider the use of a pseudonym necessary. Having once read you, I continually advised Suvorin and Burenin to follow my example. They listened to me, and now, just as I do, they feel no doubt about your real talent—a talent which places you in the front rank of writers of the new generation. I am neither a journalist nor a publisher; you are useful to me only by what you give me to read; if I speak of your talent, I speak with conviction; I am over 65, but I still feel so much love for literature; its successes are so dear to me; I rejoice so much when I find in it something gifted and living, that—as you see—I was not able to hold back, but



stretch out both hands to you. But that is not all: this is what I want to add. By the diverse merits of your indubitable talent, by the truth of the internal analysis, by the mastery of the descriptions (the snow storm, the night, the background of *Agatha* etc.), by the aesthetic feeling, when in a few lines appears the perfect image of a cloud above the setting sun which is extinguished "like a heap of dying coals", etc., you are called, I am sure, to write some admirable, truly artistic, works. You will be guilty of a great moral sin if you do not live up to these hopes. All that is needed is respect for the talent that so rarely falls to one's lot. Cease all hasty work. I do not know your financial situation: if you are poor, suffer hunger if need be, as we have all done at some time or other, and save your impressions for a mature, finished work, written not in one spurt, but during the happy hours of inspiration. A work written thus will be a hundred times more appreciated than hundreds of fine stories scattered among the newspapers: in one leap you will reach the goal: cultivated people will take notice of you, and after that, the whole reading public.

'I have been told that your stories are now coming out in a volume; if it is under the pseudonym of Chekhonta, I beg you earnestly to telegraph to the publisher telling him to publish it under your true name. After your latest stories in the *Novoe Vremya*, after the success of *The Sportsman*, it is a name that will be well received.

'Grigorovich.'

*Letter from Chekhov to Grigorovich—*

*Moscow, 31st March, 1886.*

'Your letter . . . struck me like a thunderbolt. I nearly wept, I was deeply moved and I now feel that it has left a deep mark on my soul. As you have smiled upon my youth, so may God give you peace in your old age. As for myself, I can find

neither words nor actions to show my gratitude. You know with what eyes ordinary people look upon the elect like yourself; hence you will be able to realise what your letter means to my self-esteem. Such a letter is worth more than any diploma, and for an author who is just beginning, constitutes his reward now and for the future. I feel as if under a spell. I am not in a position to judge whether I have earned this great reward or not. I repeat: it has overwhelmed me.

'If I have in me a gift which must be respected, then, I confess it to the purity of your heart, I have not respected it up to now. I felt that such a gift was in me, but I had grown accustomed to thinking it insignificant. In order to be unjust, excessively mistrustful and suspicious towards himself, all a man needs are purely external reasons. Such reasons, as I can well remember, have not been lacking. My family have never taken my work as a writer seriously, and have never ceased proffering me friendly advice not to exchange a proper profession for mere scribbling. I have hundreds of friends in Moscow, and among them dozens of authors, and I cannot recall a single one who has read me, or recognised me as an artist. There is in Moscow a so-called "Literary Circle". Talented people and mediocrities of all ages and kinds meet and gossip once a week in a private room of a restaurant. If I were to join them there and read them even a phrase or two from your letter, they would laugh in my face. During the five years of my vagabond existence in the newspapers, I soon became accustomed to looking on my work with disdain—and simply sat down and wrote. That is the first reason.

'The second is that I am a doctor, and up to my neck in my medical work. No one has lost more sleep than I have over the proverb that "one can't chase two hares at once".

'I am writing you this in order to vindicate before you, in some small measure, my grievous sin. Up to now, I have

treated my literary work with extreme frivolity and neglect. I cannot think of a single one of my stories on which I spent more than a day's work, and I wrote *The Sportsman*, the story you liked, in my bath! I have written my stories in the same way as reporters scribble their copy: mechanically, in an only half-conscious way, caring nothing for either the reader or myself . . . I wrote, and forced myself not to expend on my tales images and pictures which are dear to me and which, God knows why, I kept to myself and jealously concealed.

'What first drove me to take a critical view of my works was a very charming, and as far as I can judge, sincere letter from Suvorin. I was on the point of writing some appropriate piece, but nevertheless, I did not believe in the reality of my talent.

'And now, all of a sudden, your letter has come. You must excuse the comparison: it has had the same effect on me as a government order "to leave this town within twenty-four hours!" Which means, that I suddenly felt the absolute necessity for haste, to get out of this place in which I am stuck as quickly as possible . . .

'I will free myself of hurried work, but cannot do so immediately. It is not possible for me to escape from my present rut. I do not refuse to suffer hunger, as I have already gone hungry, but it is not a question of myself alone . . . I abandon my leisure to literature, two or three hours during the day, and a little at night, which is time enough only for small undertakings.

'Next summer, when I shall have more free time and fewer expenses, I'll settle to work in earnest.

'I cannot sign my book with my proper name because it is too late: the cover-design is ready and the book printed. Many St. Petersburg people before you advised me not to spoil the volume by employing a pseudonym, but I did not listen to them, doubtless out of pride. I do not like the book. It is

a hotch-potch, an untidy accumulation of trifling stuff written in my undergraduate days, plucked by the censorship and the editors of humorous papers! I feel that when they have read it, many people will be disappointed. If I had known that I was being read and that you were watching me, I should not have let the book be published.

'My hopes lie entirely in the future. I am only 26. Perhaps I shall manage to do something, although time passes quickly.

'Please excuse this long letter, and do not blame a man who, for the first time in his life, has dared to give himself such a great pleasure as writing a letter to Grigorovich.'

## Chapter Seventeen

A FEW weeks earlier, Suvorin, the director of *Novoe Vremya*, had written to Chekhov, asking him for some stories. This was not yet fame, but at least a first glimmer of it. *Novoe Vremya* was the largest paper in St. Petersburg. Naturally, Anton had been flattered and pleased, but this was nothing to the emotion he felt as he read Grigorovich's letter. Modest as he was, his literary elders awakened no envy in him, but an immense respect (although he had a lively and subtle critical sense). Yet, if he was prepared to judge works severely, he readily appreciated people. Such a greeting, sent to him, a young and unknown author, by a veteran of the profession, was deeply moving. But Grigorovich's letter did more than merely touch and please him, and smooth his first steps: it revealed him to himself.

What had he been up to now? A mere boy, with good intentions, naïvely happy to work, to do his best, and to earn a little money. In a charming letter of 1885, Anton describes to his old uncle Mitrofan, in Taganrog, the brilliant social and material progress made by the Chekhov family (it must not be forgotten that Mitrofan was the rich relation of the family, to whom they had often turned in need, and that his nephew was not loath to impress him):

Moscow, 31st January, 1885.

'My medical practice is going quite well. I am treating and curing people . . . Naturally, I have not made a fortune as yet, and shall not do so for some time, but I lead a tolerable existence and do not want for anything. If only I remain alive and in good health, the family's situation is *assured*. I have bought some new furniture and a good piano, I have two servants, and I give little musical evenings at which people sing and play . . . A while ago we were getting our provisions (meat and groceries) on credit; I have straightened all that out, and now we pay cash.'

Now everything was different. But it was not enough to be honest, courageous, hard-working: the burden of talent had descended on Anton's shoulders. He had, no doubt, been bearing it from childhood, but now he became conscious of it for the first time. The small book which was soon to appear, his *Motley Tales*, was not simply a diversion or a means of making money, but a grave and heavy responsibility which he was assuming towards the public, the critics, and ultimately himself. He had gone to bed an obscure writer, and woke to find himself famous. It was difficult to grasp. And he could not help finding something comical and ironical in the disparity between this fame that gained him the envy of his confrères and the admiration of his readers, and the day-to-day reality: for—'I have forty roubles in hand, and no more . . . I have again had a haemorrhage.' (*Letter from Chekhov to his friend Bilibin, Moscow, 4th March, 1886.*)

But that was nothing. Up to now, he had been free. He wrote what he pleased and as he pleased. Henceforth he was expected to have an attitude. Russia had not yet enough teachers, but must needs find another. Once more, that vast, pliable and untutored land wanted to be taught how to live and how to think. And there were all the political groups to whose influence a young writer must submit. He must turn either

towards the Right or the Left, become either a reactionary or a liberal. His first step committed him for the future. Already people were reproaching Chekhov with belonging to Suvorin (the *Novoe Vremya* was spurned by the Left: how could anyone write for a paper approved of by the government, and occasionally read by the Tsar?). Anton found such considerations odious and degrading. Grigorovich's letter had certainly taught him to read in his own heart. Up to now, he had not realised to what an extent all violence, no matter whence it came, was repugnant to him. From childhood on, he had wanted to protect his inner freedom and his dignity: and in spite of blows and misfortunes and soul-destroying work, he had succeeded. He was determined not to fall slave to his present good fortune which had come to him in such strange and unexpected fashion.

Nevertheless, he had to live up to the hopes people placed in him. What they wanted him to do now was to adopt a serious attitude, and write long, earnest tales in which each line was a lesson.

Hastily he remodelled his stories. Almost without noticing it, certainly without conscious intent, he had already written several of his masterpieces (*A Daughter of Albion*, 1883, *The Sorceress*, 1886, *The Sportsman*, 1886). To be a success, the short story demands qualities which Chekhov had possessed from birth. The gift of humour: a long, tragic novel can give an impression of a grandiose fate, but in a short story, sorrow painted in too dark and heavy colours crushes and repels. Modesty: a novelist can (and sometimes should) talk about himself, but for the short-story writer, this is impossible: his time is limited, thus he cannot reveal himself in his complexity and richness: it is wiser for him to keep out of the picture. And finally, economy of means—arising directly, no doubt, from his modest attitude. Here Chekhov's experience as a reporter stood him in good stead: the rule of journalism was to observe

and write quickly, and it had sharpened his vision, and endowed his brain with an agility that was prodigious. Already in his stories appeared hints of the seeming coldness and detachment with which he was later to be reproached. Here again, it was a rule of his medium. The short-story writer runs the risk of becoming sentimental and absurd, if he shows his pity for his characters. It may also be, perhaps, that he has not time to grow attached to those whom he describes. A novel allows one to enter into a particular setting, to become impregnated with it, to love or hate it. But a short story is a door flung open for an instant on an unknown house, and swiftly closed again. One cannot help thinking of Chekhov the doctor: what he gives us is the doctor's experience, with that of the journalist added: he diagnoses accurately, without faltering, without morbid pity, but with profound sympathy.

As Chekhov corrected his proofs, he re-read his stories as though they came from a stranger. Most of them had been written very rapidly, sometimes with negligence and disdain. Now a strange, deep-buried process began within him. He took a reverse road to that one normally travelled by the writer, and perhaps by the majority of men. Instead of going outwards from himself towards others, it was from the external world that Chekhov started, to end up with himself. Who was the real Chekhov? Later, his critics and biographers were to say of him, that between the years 1886 and 1889, he changed, becoming another man and another writer. But in reality, he had not changed: all he had done was to get to know himself. And this supreme knowledge had the same effect as all knowledge on his soul: it made him calmer and sadder. Outwardly, he remained the same. To his family and friends, he was still the gay, charming, simple, gentle Antosha, so ready to oblige, so happy to have people round him, to help his brothers, to pay court to young women. Inwardly, 'there is no great happiness



in being a great writer. First of all, life is dull. One works from morning to night, with little to show for it. I do not know how Zola or Shchedrin live, but in my house, the rooms are steamy and it is cold . . .' (*Letter to M. Kisseleva, 21st September, 1886, Moscow.*)

'Everyone's life is sad. When I am serious, it seems to me that people who fear death are not logical. As far as I am able to understand the order of things, life is composed uniquely of horrors, worry and mediocrity, which follow and overlap on one another . . .' (*Letter to the same, 29th September, 1886, Moscow.*)

Nevertheless, fame had its minor aspects, which were not without charm. People were beginning, Chekhov said, to point him out, to pay him court a little, and even to offer him sandwiches! And then there was the family, to whom Antosha's success caused boundless delight. Chekhov felt an undeniable pleasure in writing to Uncle Mitrofan in Taganrog: '. . . Before Christmas, a journalist from St. Petersburg arrived in Moscow, and took me off to St. Petersburg with him. I travelled on the express, first class, which cost the journalist a good deal. In St. Petersburg I was given such a reception that, for two months afterwards, my head was whirling with the smoke of praise. I had magnificent lodgings there, two horses, excellent food and free tickets for all the theatres. I've never lived so well in my life as I did in St. Petersburg. When I had been complimented and given an incomparable reception, I was handed a further three hundred roubles and sent back home first class.'

## Chapter Eighteen

**A** THIN, handsome face, with hollow cheeks and thick hair, a light beard barely noticeable as yet, the set of the mouth both serious and suffering, an extraordinary gaze, penetrating, tender and profound all at once, and a modest air, the air of a young girl (Tolstoy said of Chekhov a few years later: 'He walks like a girl')—such was the portrait of Anton Chekhov in 1886, the year when he became famous. He was twenty-six. He lived in an epoch when this was the age of a man approaching maturity. At thirty, in nineteenth-century Russia, a man had already reached middle-age: at forty, he was almost old. Chekhov did not think of himself as being in the prime of youth, with his character still being formed: already he turned to the past. And it was a past that caused him vexation and something even like shame:

'A young man, the son of a serf, a petty shopkeeper, brought up to respect rank (the *chin*), to kiss the hand of priests, an idolater of other people's thought, grateful for every crust of bread, often whipped . . . tormenting animals, liking to dine with rich relations . . . '—was the portrait he gave of himself several years later. As a portrait, it was doubtless unjustly severe; but what remained true was his desire for perfection, the slow labour he undertook upon his own mind and soul, and on his work, and which continued unceasingly to his death.

Despite the wish of his readers and critics, Chekhov's writing teaches nothing. He was never able to say with sincerity, as Tolstoy did: 'Act this way, and not otherwise.' Occasionally, he tried to express himself in this way, as those around him urged him to do: but his words rang false. On the other hand, his letters and his life present us with the admirable picture of a man who, born upright, sensitive and good, constantly strove to become better, ever more gentle and ready to help others, more loving, patient and discerning. Gradually, this even led to a curious result: the more he showed his sympathy for other people, the less he felt it at the bottom of his heart. All those who knew Chekhov intimately speak of a certain coldness which he had in him like an unalterable crystal. 'His first impression was nearly always spoilt by a sort of disgust, coldness and hostility.' Kuprin wrote of him: 'He could be good and generous without loving, tender and attentive without attachment. As soon as Chekhov made someone's acquaintance, he invited him home, asked him to dine, did him a service, and then later, in a letter, he described it all with a feeling of cold lassitude.'

Was he unable to love deeply because he was too intelligent and lucid? Was there some discord in his feelings and in his life, which forced him to pour out too much of himself to indifferent onlookers, only to withdraw himself hastily the next moment? Or was it merely that, with painful shyness, he concealed what he really thought? Bunin, one of the subtlest and most perspicacious of critics, has uttered what is no doubt the final word on Chekhov: 'No one among those who were nearest to him ever knew fully what went on in the depths of his soul.'

And Chekhov himself, in a private note-book, remarks: 'Just as I shall be laid alone in the grave, thus, at bottom, I live alone.' Alone . . . And yet he had a large family, and many friends and readers. From 1886 onwards he was surrounded by an ever

more brilliant circle. Chaikovsky, Grigorovich, Korolenko, and many others . . . people of the widest renown, men of the greatest intelligence, all visited the house in Moscow in which the Chekhovs lived. It was a two-storied building, 'which looks like a chest of drawers', one storey with shutters always open wide in the Russian fashion, like a mill. 'Anton likes people', his parents said. 'Anton is only happy amidst noise and conversation and laughter', his brothers affirmed. Perhaps it was true. 'I need people around me,' he confessed, 'because when I am alone, I don't know why, I am afraid.'

His family undertook to surround him with the human warmth and bustle that was considered so necessary to keep Anton in a good humour. And they were a charming lot, the family: there was, of course, his father, coarse, ignorant and rough; his mother, who had not lost the habit of weeping on every occasion; his elder brother Alexander, who constantly asked for money and importuned the others with his grievances; Nicholas, who led a degraded existence, and Marie, who in her love for Anton was complicated and hysterical, meddlesome and demanding; but, all things considered, they were charming people. They did not stand on ceremony with each other. If anyone wanted to sing, he sang. If anyone felt moved to long, confidential outpourings, he indulged them. They showed no more respect for the work of the celebrated writer than they had for that of the obscure student of a few years earlier.

And Chekhov continued to ask: 'Please let me have twenty-five roubles in advance,' and to write.

For the first time in his life—if one disregards the longer stories of his youth which were put together clumsily and in haste—he abandoned the form of the short story and drew nearer to that of the novel. *The Steppe* was written in 1887-1888.

He wrote it with apprehension, irked by the notion that people's eyes were upon him.

'The thought that I am writing for a big paper [*The Steppe* was to appear in the *Northern Messenger*, and these literary reviews enjoyed great prestige in Russia with readers and authors] and that people will look at my trifles with more seriousness than they warrant, jogs me by the elbow as the Devil did the monk. I am writing a story about the steppe. I am writing, but I feel that it does not give off the scent of hay.' (*Letter to Shcheglov*, 1st January, 1887, *Moscow*.)

He found it difficult also to 'spin it out'. For years he had been obsessed by the exigencies of the short story: brevity and a light touch at all costs. Despite his efforts, *The Steppe* was really a string of short stories. Each page was in fact a polished little tale by itself. The whole work appeared to be made of bits and pieces. But he had been wise enough to choose a very simple subject, which did not entail a plot, and with a child as the main character. A child's vision is swift and fragmentary; he undergoes a succession of fleeting sensations, but does not submit them to the control of thought. In this way, *The Steppe* preserved its unity and truth.

Its hero is a little boy, Egorushka, who has never left his village, tucked away in a remote corner of southern Russia. He is almost nine, and it is time for him to go to school. He leaves for the town, a large port (Taganrog). The journey there across the steppe takes days and nights to accomplish. In just this fashion did Anton Chekhov as a child travel from Taganrog to see his grandfather. Again later, in adolescence, he travelled over the plains on foot, on horseback, by bullock-cart, in the company of friends, peasants, merchants, and pilgrims. Egorushka watches the storm rising, and is afraid; he is tired and cold; he sleeps for the first time in his life on the grass; he is happy and curious to learn everything; he listens to the talk of his travelling companions; he half understands, and begins to dream. He is a quiet, reflective, rather sad child. Chekhov never depicted any

others. The children he describes are always reserved and melancholy. Egorushka falls ill one night at an inn, as Anton had once done. 'The Ukrainian peasants, the bullocks, the vultures, the white cottages, the little rivers of the South'—all the things Anton had known and loved reappear in the story.

A writer whose childhood has been unhappy finds it a great boon to be able to tap this source of poetry from his past. The year he wrote *The Steppe*, Chekhov visited Taganrog. He had not been back there for seven years. 'It is so disgusting that even Moscow, with its mud and its typhoid fevers, seems pleasant.' (*Letter to his sister*, 1887.) But the steppe! . . . 'The swarthy hills, brown and green, lilac in the distance . . . and the smell of the steppe. I see my old friends, the vultures.' Gorky later said of the story that it seemed on every page to be embroidered with rare pearls. It was a success. But throughout Chekhov's life, chance always made sure he would taste the bitter dregs in the cup. At the very moment that *The Steppe* appeared, Chekhov's first play, *Ivanov*, met with a most resounding and undeserved setback in Moscow.

## Chapter Nineteen

THE director of the Korsh Theatre in Moscow had asked Chekhov for a play, which he hoped would be a comedy. (To the general public, the name of Chekhov still meant above all an author of humorous stories: no one was yet used to the tender and serious tone he adopted from 1888-1889 onwards.) But Chekhov wrote *Ivanov*, which was a very different matter. 'Contemporary dramatists', he said, 'stuff their plays solely with angels, monsters and buffoons. For that reason, I wanted to be original. I have not created a single brigand or a single angel . . . I have accused no one and acquitted no one . . .'

The moralising and didactic mania which raged in Russia had not spared the theatre. The audience wanted to see characters who were virtuous, self-sacrificing, energetic and honest. The Russian middle-class experienced an extreme satisfaction in listening to noble discourses on liberty, human dignity, and the happiness of the people. Their conscience was in this way appeased, and they could go on living as they liked, sunk in indolence and selfish indifference, and seeking petty profits. They derived much harmless pleasure from imagining they were thus flaunting the authorities and vexing the government. The theatre-going public has never loved truth, and it was truth that the young Chekhov undertook to present.

Ivanov is unhappily married: he has married a woman who is not of his race or background. His ambition has been to be a hero, and take on a hundred single-handed. He has tried to be more generous, more honest, and less selfish than his weak nature and mediocre soul allow. Five years have passed, and he no longer loves his wife; she is consumptive and is going to die: on learning this fact, he feels 'neither love, nor pity, but a sort of void and weariness'. He abandons her, deceives and insults her. He is responsible for the unfortunate Sarah's death. People detest and despise him, but for all that, he is not a wicked man: he is sincere. He has brought misery on another and himself, but . . . 'if he is guilty, he does not know why . . .', 'he has deceived himself but he has not lied to anyone', 'people like Ivanov cannot resolve problems, but succumb under their weight . . .'

Since the publication of Alexander Chekhov's letters to his brother Anton, one cannot help thinking that Ivanov's character resembles a little that of Alexander, whose strange and tormented career we find outlined in his correspondence. Alexander had been a gifted, intelligent boy, and there is no doubt that in his early youth he enjoyed great prestige in Anton's eyes. He was warm-hearted and clever, yet he had turned out badly. He had begun life with a ridiculous liaison. It is impossible to imagine anything more squalid or chaotic than his home life. Without possessing a penny, Alexander was burdened with a family: he had not only his own children to support but his wife's son by an earlier union. He married twice. On neither occasion did love or reason play a part, but a curious sentiment compounded of generosity, self-deception, and weakness of character. And both times he turned out a bad husband, drunken and overwhelmed with debts, unable to endure the unfortunate creatures he had 'saved'. And yet, Alexander was to be pitied. Anton judged him severely, and pitied him in spite of himself.



In the famous monologue of Ivanov ('don't marry Jewesses, nor neurotics, nor blue-stockings . . . don't make war on thousands single-handed, don't tilt at windmills, or beat your head against a brick wall') may be heard an echo of the advice Anton gave to his brother, counselling moderation and prudence, balance and self-control.

But the real significance of Ivanov was that he had many of the characteristics of his race and epoch. His faults and his unhappiness were Russian. 'Russian zeal has a specific quality: it soon turns to fatigue. A man full of ardour, having barely left the school desk, wants to lift a burden which is beyond his strength . . . But no sooner has he reached thirty, or thirty-five, than he begins to feel weary and bored . . .' (*Letter to Suvorin*, 30th December, 1888.)

Certainly he was thinking of Alexander: he was thinking also of Nicholas, who had similarly destroyed a very real talent by his crazy mode of living (he lived with a prostitute, drank, and died of consumption). On the stage, Ivanov kills himself. In real life, Nicholas died at thirty-one. Alexander survived, became a petty clerk for Suvorin, settled down, but never found happiness. His moral decline, the extraordinary pettiness of his interests, the continual set-backs he suffered, his bitterness and unrest, are perhaps more tragic than a premature death. But many others, listening to Ivanov, must have recognised themselves. (It must not be forgotten that in giving his hero the most common of Russian names, Chekhov certainly intended to emphasise his universal character.)

Naturally, the public reacted vigorously. It was both more and less than a failure—it was a scandal. Chekhov's family, in their ground-floor box, trembled in anticipation. Behind the scenes, the author himself hid 'at the back of a small dressing-room, like a prisoner's cell'. The actors played badly: the play had been given only four rehearsals. Anton's sister almost

fainted. 'I was calm', Chekhov said. His calmness must have been rather like that of a man in a railway accident who has not been injured, but who continues to stare at what is happening around him and to move with mechanical gestures. When the curtain fell between scenes, the agitated actors made signs to each other, and with painted lips murmured useless encouragements and futile, last-minute pieces of advice.

The first three acts were well received. But after that! . . . The prompter himself, in thirty-two years of theatre experience, had never seen anything like it. 'People shouted and screamed, clapped and whistled. At the buffet, one had to go almost on hands and knees: while the students in the top gallery wanted to throw someone over, and the police took two of them out.' (*Letter to Alexander, Moscow, 24th November, 1887.*)

The latter circumstance may have faintly consoled the author, but if he cherished any illusions about the success of the play, a perusal of the next day's newspapers soon dispelled them: 'One never expected great things of M. Chekhov, but one would never have dreamed that a young man with a university education [*sic*] would have the audacity to present the public with such bare-faced cynicism.' 'It was a thoroughly immoral play. It would take a spineless and indifferent audience indeed to be able to listen calmly to such rubbish.'

The critics had always treated Chekhov harshly. He had been very upset when, at the beginning of his career, one of them had prophesied he would die drunk one day on someone's doorstep. It was unpleasant to hear their opinions of *Ivanov*, but these touched him less than earlier attacks: his real task, after all, was to write short stories: the theatre was not his business.

Further stories, *Fires*, *The Birthday*, *The Crisis*, etc., therefore appeared and were well received. In 1888 he was given a literary prize (half of the Pushkin prize), and began to occupy an important place in the literary life of his time. His short stories

now had a graver accent than those of his youth, and all his friends congratulated him for it. At long last, he had realised the true importance of the writer's role, the nature of his mission, and how everything created in a country like Russia, with its tragic destiny, was rich in consequences. If he had fallen under the influence of Tolstoy, so much the better. If he had almost banished humour from his works, it was all to the good. From the point of view of literary success, it was better to weep than to laugh. But there was an extraordinary inner freedom in Chekhov, something subtle and evasive, vital and contradictory, that no one ever succeeded in subduing. He himself was aware of the fact. 'I seem always to be deceiving people,' he said; 'my expression is either too gay or too serious.'

The Chekhov who was so quick to oblige, who would go to infinite pains for his friends and, privately, sent them to the devil, the Chekhov who was so frank and open, yet who managed to keep secret and to destroy a novel long brooded over, written with love, and of which no one had ever read a line, the timid, modest Chekhov whom all Russia implored to be serious, listened to advice, held his tongue, and wrote a vaudeville sketch : *The Bear*. ('If they knew I was writing a farce, what an outcry there would be!')

And on the stage of the same Korsh Theatre in which the drama *Ivanov* had failed so dismally, the farce proved a success. It was such a success materially that, for the first time in his life, Chekhov enjoyed a few months' respite, almost a year, free from financial worry.

## Chapter Twenty

**S**HORTLY afterwards, *Ivanov* was produced in St. Petersburg, and by an inexplicable switch in public favour, the play that had fallen so flat the year before was now greeted rapturously.

17th February, 1889: 'My *Ivanov* continues to be a colossal, phenomenal success. There are two heroes of the day in St. Petersburg at the moment: Semigradski's *Phryne*, naked, and myself, clothed.'

Theatrical success brought its own exhilaration, and Chekhov began to love the atmosphere of the wings. He spent the whole of Easter night with drunken actors, drinking himself. A few days later (5th March, 1889), he notes that he has been to see the gypsies, apparently for the first time, which is rather surprising. 'Those wild creatures sing well . . . Their singing is like the crash of a train falling from the top of a cliff during a violent storm . . .'

At the beginning of the summer, the whole family, as in other years, left for the country. Chekhov rarely separated from them. He was as used to them, he said, as a bump on the head or a piece of luggage. But it was costly luggage, for he had to write and write to support them all. Yet Suvorin said to Alexander:

'Why does your brother write so much? It's very harmful.'

And old Grigorovich, with his long white hair and silvery moustache and beard, his innocent and joyous, pure and lofty air of an ageing child (elderly intellectuals delighted in assuming these expressions of candour), raised his arms heavenwards: 'Forbid him to write so much! He's doing it to make money? In my day, we didn't write to make money!'

Charming Grigorovich! Chekhov was certainly fond of him, but respected him less than before: he smiled, and let the words pass. 'Papa and mama have to eat.' Uncomplainingly, he dragged his family after him. Three summers running, the Chekhovs had stayed at Babkino, but now he had leased a small house in Ukraine, paying a hundred roubles for the season. The house had been built at one end of an abandoned park, on the banks of a broad, deep river, and on holidays, the Ukrainian peasants came down the river in boats, playing the violin. The owners lived in the big house: the mother was a kindly and cultured woman who read Schopenhauer and admired Chekhov. Her elder daughter was blind; she was suffering from a tumour on the brain, and knew that death was near and unavoidable.

'I am a doctor,' Chekhov said, 'and accustomed to seeing people who are soon to die. It always seemed strange to see before me, talking, smiling or weeping, people whose death was imminent. But now, when I see the blind girl on the terrace, laughing or joking or listening to someone reading from my book, what strikes me as strange is not that she must die, but that we do not feel our own death and that we write our books as though we need never die.'

The second daughter was shy, gentle and quiet. Both had studied medicine. The youngest daughter, strong, sunburned and always laughing, had organised a school on the estate and taught the Ukrainian peasant children Krylov's fables. There were also two boys, one of whom was a talented pianist.

The landowning nobility in Russia in the nineteenth century

often produced types of an extraordinarily pure and lofty intellectual and moral stature; educated and disinterested, they were at ease only in an austere and lucid atmosphere, just as the mountaineer breathes freely only on the heights. Their life was made up of music, reading, fruitful and serious conversations, and ideal loves. They were hospitable, friendly and simple, full of goodwill and a love of nature and art. All about them, poverty, vice and corruption were rampant; these things they felt keenly and deplored, but they had not the strength to change one iota of the outside world. They sighed and waited in gentle indolence and elegant resignation for better days, occupying themselves with ineffectual good works—founding a school or hospital, or helping the peasant children. Others were to come later . . . But meanwhile, full of admirable intentions, and living with great dignity on their impoverished estates, they possessed a purity, a melancholy and weakness which greatly appealed to Chekhov. What he loved most of all was the setting of their lives: the huge, uncared-for gardens, the ponds and the avenues of limes, the beautiful manor-houses with their clean and noble lines, the white and sparsely furnished rooms, the strains of violin and piano escaping in the evenings through open windows, the long conversations at twilight on the terrace. All this was new to Chekhov the city-dweller and, self-made man as he was, he found it moving. He was able to write about the landowning gentry just as well as Turgenev, and an almost prophetic accent resounds through many of his pages: it was a society in decline, a class already doomed, that he depicted. But nature enchanted him even more.

*10th May, 1888, Soumy, Government of Kharkov, Lintvarev estate:*

'Somewhere among the grass of the river bank cries a mysterious bird, which is rarely to be seen and is known locally as "bougai." It has a call like a cow locked in the stable, like

the sound of the last trump . . . The mosquitoes are reddish-brown and very vicious; the swamps and ponds give off a breath of fever . . .'

But:

' . . . what marvellous music we heard in the silence of the evening, and what a heavy scent of fresh hay . . . The Smaguin estate (these were distant relations of the Lintvarevs) is ancient, abandoned, and dead as a last year's spider web. The house is subsiding; the doors will not shut, and the young shoots of cherry and plum trees are appearing in the cracks between the floor boards. A nightingale had built his nest between the window and the shutter in the room where I slept . . .'

There were many feminine friendships in Chekhov's life at that period. All these amiable and earnest women admired him and felt a tenderness for him that was almost maternal, and at the same time were full of coquetry and provocative glances: for if Chekhov the writer retained his inner freedom, this was even more true of Chekhov the man. He was so secretive, so withdrawn and shy: with him, women felt they were on shifting ground, full of unseen pitfalls. The heroes of his stories only love half-way, or hold themselves aloof from love, and Chekhov was not unlike them.

The first summer he spent in Ukraine was delightful from beginning to end. The letters he wrote to his friends that year are an exquisite blend of charm, malice and childish, light-hearted merriment. At the beginning of August, he went to spend a few days with the Suvorins in the Crimea, and travelled over the Black Sea and the Caspian. He was gay and happy, full of naïve pleasure at his success.

A shadow was cast over the new year, 1889, at the very start, by Nicholas' illness. For a long time, Nicholas' state of health had been causing his family anxiety. Chekhov could not shut his

eyes to the obvious fact that his brother was dying of tuberculosis. Now he was paying the price for an unruly existence; the childhood deprived of adequate warmth and shelter when he ran through the snow in worn-out boots, his passion for wine, and his degrading liaison. 'The painter is in a bad way. He drinks a great deal of milk, but his temperature remains the same, and he is losing weight every day. His cough gives him no rest. He lies on the bed in his room, goes out for half an hour, sleeps a good deal, and is delirious in his sleep.' (4th June, 1889.) The end was drawing near. Chekhov the doctor recognised in himself the same alarming symptoms of Nicholas' illness. He had had a second, very violent, haemorrhage in 1886. 'Every winter, autumn and spring, and every damp day in summer, I begin coughing. But I am only afraid when I see blood.' (*Letter to Suvorin*, 14th October, 1888.) And yet, he would not take the trouble to treat himself or change his way of life. He watched Nicholas dying with deep compassion. He had loved his brother dearly, and recognised his great talent. It was above all the loss of that talent that he mourned.

Alexander arrived in June, and Chekhov wanted to take advantage of his presence to rest for a few days. With a friend, he wanted to go back to the Smaguins' estate which had pleased him so much the year before, to sleep once more in the room where the nightingale had built his nest, and where the sprigs of wild cherry grew through the floor. But now, everything had changed . . . When they were half-way there, it began to rain. Chekhov and his companion arrived at the Smaguins' at night, drenched and frozen; we lay down in cold beds, and dropped off to sleep to the sound of the cold rain. I shall never in my life forget the muddy road, the grey sky, and the tears on the trees. In the morning, a young peasant arrived, bringing us a sodden telegram: Kolya is dead.'

They left for home at once. In the town, they had to stop and



the sound of the last trump . . . The mosquitoes are reddish-brown and very vicious; the swamps and ponds give off a breath of fever . . .'

But:

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## Chapter Twenty-One

AFTER Nicholas' death, Chekhov had only one idea: to flee from the family and the reminders of their bereavement. But they pursued him, and he was quite literally unable to escape from grave and sombre cares. For several years past, he had been much under the influence of Tolstoy, not of Tolstoy the writer, but of the teacher who in his pessimism saw death at the end of everything, and who struggled with a desperate sincerity to understand the reason for his existence, and preached self-effacement and total devotion to suffering humanity. In a series of stories, *The Good People* and *On The Road* (1886), *The Beggar* and *The Meeting* (1887) and above all, *A Dull Story* (1889), this influence is characteristic and dominant, and produced the worst possible effect on Chekhov's art. For the first and last time in his life, he looked on the world through eyes other than his own. *A Dull Story* resembles *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, but while Tolstoy fully achieved his purpose, Chekhov did so only partially. Ivan Ilyich is an ordinary man who suddenly one fine day finds himself face to face with death. From death's shadow, he looks back over his past life, and perceives its tragic futility and emptiness. Without love and without lofty aspirations, devoid equally of base passions and ardent desires, he believed he was living, but he has not lived. It is impossible to read the

story of Ivan Ilyich without feeling a shudder of horror at the human predicament. But Chekhov wanted to go still further than Tolstoy. His hero is a famous and revered professor. Old age and illness come upon him, and death approaches. All he has formerly cherished he now finds sickening, false and repugnant. The wife and daughter he once loved so tenderly now arouse only coldness and disgust in him; he has brought up an orphan, Katya, whom he prefers to his own family. The feeling he has for her is not quite paternal affection, although it is also certainly not simply love. He wants to bring her happiness, to help her to live and teach her truth, but is incapable of doing so. He has lived without purpose, without faith, without a real desire to live, and is in fact the most futile of human beings. Unfortunately, he does not move us. Tolstoy embraced life and love and fleshly pleasures with such ardour that even when he wanted to curse them he uttered a blessing instead. We feel sorry for Ivan Ilyich because he has frittered away the marvellous and unique experience of living, but the old professor seems always to have existed in an abstract state. He is not so much a man as a soulless mechanism, and the fact that he has to die seems of no great importance. We feel like saying rather: it's all he deserves. Ivan Ilyich terrifies and moves us, and is part of ourselves. The professor is alien to us.

Chekhov gained nothing from the several years he spent imitating the great Tolstoy. It would be hard to imagine two natures more at variance than those of the two writers. Tolstoy was wholly made up of passion and sublimely headstrong, while Chekhov was sceptical and detached from everything. One burns like a flame, the other bathes the exterior world in a cold, subdued light.

Tolstoy the aristocrat idealised humble folk; Chekhov the commoner had suffered too much from the coarseness and cowardliness of those same humble folk to feel anything more

towards them than a lucid compassion. Tolstoy despised elegance and luxury, science and art, which were all things that Chekhov loved. Tolstoy hated women and carnal love because of the effort it cost him, with his passionate nature and vigorous body, to renounce them, while Chekhov, delicate and sickly, could not understand the importance of sin, because that sin had never stirred any chord in his deepest being. But doubtless the unbridged gulf that lay between them was really created by the fact that Tolstoy believed, and Chekhov did not. The former had a tortured faith, the latter a calm incredulity. Tolstoy professed despair, while Chekhov thought of himself as an optimist; but in reality it was Chekhov who was right when he said a few years later, speaking of the master:

'I do not think he was unhappy.'

Tolstoy knew a happiness which doubtless Chekhov, to whom fulfilment was consistently denied, never discovered. Engaged in a perpetual search for something that is not to be found on this earth, he was always afraid of surrendering wholly either to joy or sorrow. Tolstoy was very different: and if, through his powerful make-up and iron constitution, his sufferings were multiplied tenfold, so too were his pleasures. But what Tolstoy loved as a man, he denied to others as a writer: he taught that man needs neither earth nor space nor freedom nor human love in order to find his soul, and that above all he must desire nothing. And Chekhov, ageing and consumptive, who possessed so few things in this world, protested, timidly at first, then with vehemence:

'It is death that needs nothing. The living man needs everything, the whole world . . . God created man in order that he should live, and know joy and anguish, and misfortune . . . And you desire nothing, you are not alive, you are a stone . . .'  
(*In Exile.*)

But in 1889, Chekhov, weary, demoralised, apprehensive

and disappointed, had not yet freed himself from Tolstoy's teaching. The stories of that period are the feeblest and least convincing he ever wrote.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

THE summer following the death of his brother Nicholas, Chekhov left for the island of Sakhalin. None of those round him could understand why he was undertaking such a strange and arduous journey. At that time, there was no Trans-Siberian railway. One had to buy a carriage and hire horses in order to travel across those tracts of wild and sparsely populated country with their severe climate, enduring cold and fatigue, lacking even the most elementary comforts—and all that merely to arrive at Sakhalin, the accursed island that served as a convict settlement, the most god-forsaken place on earth.

Chekhov, when asked the reason for his journey, replied: 'I want to live for six months as I have not lived up to now.'

He planned to spend two months on Sakhalin, and then to return to Europe by way of Nagasaki, Shanghai, Manilla, Singapore, Colombo, Port Said and Constantinople. It is easy to imagine what fascination such names must have possessed for someone born in Taganrog, and who for ten years had had to be content with family holidays in Ukraine or in the neighbourhood of Moscow! Chekhov was not sorry to escape from the family. But most of all, he thought that his journey and the book he would write on his return might be turned to good account. Everyone criticised the Russian penal system, but no one had

taken the trouble to study it, exposing its evils and suggesting remedies. And yet Siberia was a reality—the darkest of Russian realities. ‘Just as the Turks go to Mecca, we should go on pilgrimage to Siberia,’ Chekhov used to say. Millions of Russians suffered and died there. The writer felt that it was impossible to shut one’s eyes and turn away from ‘that sea of tears, that scene of intolerable sufferings.’ On his return, he decided, he would relate very coldly and soberly all that he had seen and then, perhaps, thanks to his efforts, some improvements might be made in an inhuman regime. Apart from that, he had always loved change and the impact of new impressions. Without doubt, he already had a foreboding that his life would not be a long one, and therefore it must be rich in impressions and sensations. He set out at the beginning of the summer of 1890.

The journey seemed endless, and he had not dreamt that it could be so tedious. From Tyumen to Irkutsk, he travelled three thousand versts in bitter cold weather. May had arrived, but there were still falls of snow. Unfortunately, it was the season of the year when the rivers, losing their carapace of ice, overflowed and inundated the countryside.

‘This is a veritable plague of Egypt,’ Chekhov wrote. The roads vanished beneath the water, and they were continually forced to abandon the carriage and travel in boats which threatened to sink every moment. ‘One has to spend whole days sitting on the river bank, in the rain and the cold wind, waiting, waiting, waiting . . .’ Meanwhile on the river ‘the blocks of ice swirled by . . . The water was muddy . . . It flowed with a strange din, as if on the bottom someone were nailing up coffins.’ Chekhov had nightmares about the rivers.

Between Tomsk and Krasnoyarsk there was no more snow, but instead, the terrible northern mud in which wheels stick fast, axles break, and the horses slither and fall. Food was

scarce and bad. 'The Russian is a pig . . . (*Letter to Marie Chekhov, 13th June, 1890, on the shores of Lake Baikal*) . . . if you ask him why he doesn't eat meat or fish, he says it's because of lack of transport, etc., and yet you can find vodka in the remotest villages, and as much of it as you want . . . One would have thought it easier to get meat or fish than vodka, which costs more and is harder to transport. But no! Doubtless it's much more entertaining to drink spirits than to go to the trouble of fishing on Lake Baikal.' There was no chance of sleeping in a bed, or washing, or changing one's linen.

When they left Krasnoyarsk, the winter was over; and now Chekhov suffered from heat and thirst, dust and mosquitoes. But the *taiga*, 'a forest without end', was superb. No one knew its extent: the trees covered hundreds of versts. Occasionally Laplanders passed through the forest on their reindeer sledges, to buy bread in the villages. Pathways could be glimpsed, but no one knew where they led—perhaps to some secret liquor still, perhaps to an encampment of escaped convicts. The waters of Lake Baikal—which was so vast that the natives called it 'the sea'—were turquoise and so transparent that one could look down on piled rocks and mountains at the bottom of a terrifying abyss. Otherwise, however, 'the Siberian natural scene differs little (outwardly) from the Russian . . . it is all ordinary and monotonous.'

Chekhov felt a sort of naïve pride in having come so far without mishap. His travelling arrangements had been excellent, and while passing through a region where, according to rumour, travellers were daily attacked by escaped convicts, he had lost nothing from his luggage except a pocket-knife. In any case, the rumour was by now an idle one: 'Such things did happen once, a long time ago . . . A revolver is quite an unnecessary article nowadays.' 'I feel as though I had just passed an exam,' Chekhov concluded.



At last he came in sight of gloomy Sakhalin. The authorities gave him an excellent reception. He was allowed to visit the prisons and talk to the convicts, 'provided, of course, that he had nothing to do with the political prisoners.' That went without saying.

Chekhov explored the island, entered the prison buildings, and saw the damp hovels with their walls swarming with vermin, where the chained prisoners slept on boards. He visited the *izbas* where former convicts led a miserable and squalid existence with their wives, whom they had brought from Russia and whose only means of livelihood was prostitution, and their children. Here all races and religions met—Russians, Tartars, Jews, Poles. Here were the guilty and the innocent alike: madmen, and drunkards who had killed or stolen once in a moment of drunkenness or blind rage, and who no longer remembered what crime it was they were expiating.

Last of all, Chekhov got to know the warders. Sometimes they were ignorant and sadistic brutes. But often, which was worse, they were honest and well-meaning, yet could do nothing to help their fellows. Chekhov witnessed executions and torture, for the men continued to be beaten with rods even for minor offences. In Siberia, on the island of Sakhalin, were freely sown those seeds of madness and cruelty, hatred and death which, less than thirty years later, were to raise such a terrible harvest.

In the account which he wrote of his voyage, after his return, Chekhov, one feels, is struggling to remain calm, and to speak of those horrors with the cold lucidity of a doctor. He expresses himself in cautious and measured sentences. Here is the passage where he speaks of the children of the island:

'The children watch the fettered prisoners pass with indifference . . . they play at soldiers and prisoners . . . The

children of Sakhalin talk of tramps, and birch rods . . . they know what the word executioner means . . .'

One day, Chekhov went into a peasant's *izba*, where he found only a little boy of ten: he began to talk to him.

' "What is your father's name?" I asked.

' "I don't know," he replied.

' "How is that? You live with your father and you don't know what his name is? You should be ashamed."

' "He's not my real father."

' "What do you mean—he's not your real father?"

' "He is my mother's lover."

' "Is your mother married or a widow?"

' "A widow. She came here because of her husband."

' "What do you mean by saying: She came because of her husband?"

' "She killed him."

' "Do you remember your father?"

' "No, I don't remember him. I am a bastard." '

Even old people and pregnant women were beaten with birch rods. It was a terrible punishment, but the prisoners gradually got used to it, and some of them, hardened by frequent beatings, scarcely felt the pain, while others went mad or died. Chekhov witnessed several such spectacles, and for three nights was unable to sleep. He hoped that by describing these tortures in the calmest possible manner and without partisan feeling he would strike the imagination of his readers more than if he became impassioned and raged against their perpetrators. But the public read his account, gave a mild shudder, and promptly forgot it again.

Chekhov had to confess to himself that his journey, with all its rigours and sleepless nights, had brought no aid to suffering humanity. It was difficult for a writer to 'serve' as Tolstoy wished: Chekhov now realised it once and for all. Henceforth,

he would restrict himself to the role of onlooker. He had always thought that 'if one is talking about horse-thieves, it is pointless to say that it is bad to steal horses', and now he was sure of it.

His health seemed to have given him no trouble on the journey to Siberia, but on the return trip he caught cold, and was still unwell when he reached Moscow. 'Now my cough has begun, I have to use a handkerchief all the time, and in the evening, I feel feverish. I must look after myself.' (*Letter to Shcheglov, 10th December, 1890, Moscow.*) But he was well content: he had accomplished one of his dearest desires, to travel outside Russia, far from Europe. 'I thank God', he said, 'that He has given me the strength and the means to undertake this journey . . . I have seen and felt much, and everything is now extremely interesting and new . . .' 'I am content,' he wrote further on, 'satisfied and delighted to such a degree that I should not complain if I were attacked by paralysis, or if dysentery despatched me to the other world. I can say: I have lived! . . . I have been in hell (Sakhalin) and in paradise, in the island of Ceylon.'

A number of admirable stories came out of this journey. The finest are undoubtedly *In Exile* (the convicts at night by the water's edge) and that masterpiece, *Gusev* (the death of a soldier at sea). The basis of this story may have been an incident which Chekhov recalled in a letter to Suvorin (*Moscow, 9th December, 1890*):

'On the way to Singapore, we buried two bodies at sea. When you see the corpse, sewn in canvas, hurtle with a somersault into the water, and when you remember that it's several leagues to the bottom, you begin to feel afraid, and you get the idea that you too will die and be thrown into the sea . . .'

In Japan, an epidemic of cholera had broken out, and Chekhov was not able to land there: he returned by way of Hong-Kong, Singapore and India.

' . . . I remember very little about Singapore, because while I was passing through it, I felt sad, I don't know why. I was almost in tears. Then came Ceylon, the place which was Paradise. In that Paradise, I travelled more than a hundred versts by rail, and had my fill of palm forests and bronze women. When I have children, I'll tell them, not without pride: "You sons of dogs, in my day I had an affaire with a black-eyed Hindu girl . . . and where? In a forest of coconut palms, in the moonlight . . . "'

'The world is beautiful. Only one thing is evil: ourselves.'

This blend of jest and melancholy and calm disillusionment is the very heart and soul of the Chekhov one finds in the stories and letters; it is his own inimitable accent.

Now that he had tasted the delights of long voyages, he could no longer remain in one place. He continued to feel unwell. But in the spring of 1891 he joined his publisher and friend Suvorin on a trip abroad. He had never been to Europe, and now he visited Vienna, Venice, Florence, Rome, Naples, Nice and Paris. At first, he was pleased, enchanted by everything: 'The houses in Vienna with their six or seven stories, the shops where one finds extraordinary objects in bronze, porcelain and leather . . . the women, so elegant and lovely . . .' 'I have never in my life seen a city as marvellous as Venice . . . In the evening, when one is not used to it, one could die of such beauty . . . The gondolas . . . The air so soft and calm, and the stars . . . A poor humble Russian could quite easily go out of his wits in this universe of beauty and opulence and freedom. One would like to live here for ever, and when one stands in a church and listens to the organ, one would like to become a Catholic . . . One feels like weeping, because wherever one goes, one hears music and magnificent singing . . .'

But the next day it rained. 'Venezia bella' was no longer 'bella.' A leaden tedium settled over the water, and his only

desire was 'to escape quickly to somewhere where the sun is shining'.

In Rome and Florence, he became tired and bored with the museums, and thought nostalgically of Russia and a plate of 'shchi with gruel'. In Monte Carlo, with Suvorin's son, he invented an infallible martingale, and also lost, needless to say, all the money he had on him. 'My God, how contemptible and disgusting the life is here, with its artichokes and palm-trees and scent of orange blossom. I like luxury and opulence, but *this roulette table* gives me the impression of a magnificent W.C.'

In short, 'Rome is like Kharkov, and Naples is dirty'. (*Letter to Marie Chekhov, Naples, April, 1891.*)

All the same, he liked Paris, and found the French 'an admirable people'. But he was tired, and wanted to return 'home'. At times, he felt the desire for a new background, a new country, as one may desire a woman. But each time he was soon wearied, and began to search again for something different, a foreign sky. He carried with him a small jewel which bore this inscription: 'To him who is alone, the whole world is a desert.'

He had traversed this desert in every direction, dreaming now of the East, now of Italy, and when he was in Singapore or Venice, longing for Moscow, where he coughed up blood. He was growing old.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

CHEKHOV was always pressed for time when he wrote; his manuscripts had to be delivered on a date arranged beforehand between the publishers and himself, and he was too conscientious to break his word. But the necessity of finishing a story at all costs on a given day was hard.

' . . . Because of that,' he said, 'the beginning is full of promise, as though I were starting on a novel, the middle is cramped and awkward, and the end . . . mere fireworks.'

The writer's whole life seems to have been composed in the manner of one of his own stories. His childhood and adolescence were rich in people, in scenes, in experiences of every kind; then in youth, when fate took swifter strides, he knew success and failure, a thousand different tasks, illness, travel, deaths, and finally love. His life should have continued, long and fruitful, but instead it was as if someone had pronounced the words that Chekhov had heard so often: 'The work must be ready by such-and-such a day . . . ' And already those words—The End—take shape upon the page.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

**R**USSIAN critics, when they wanted to be kind to Chekhov, compared his stories to those of Maupassant. Maupassant is a marvellous artist, unjustly disparaged nowadays, but it must be admitted that his stories all too often seem like flawless pieces of machinery, while Chekhov's are living entities, with all the defects and virtues of living beings: human imperfection and the mysterious pulse of life.

Edmond Jaloux has remarked with perfect justice that the best stories of Maupassant are spoiled by their strained, anecdotic character: they are aimed at a single effect. The last sentence pierces the reader's consciousness like an arrow. But Chekhov wants to create an impression similar to that created by music. By a sort of limpid and sonorous echo, his stories finish in a major or minor key.

Maupassant, Mérimée and many others in their stories bring a single episode or a single event into the limelight. Multiplicity of characters and scenes is kept for the novel. This seems logical, but in fact, is purely arbitrary, like most rules in art. Whenever, in a short story or novel, one hero or one event is thrown into relief, the narrative itself is impoverished: the complexity, beauty and depth of reality depend on the innumerable ties that exist between one man and another, one life and another, and between joy and suffering.

Chekhov tried to encompass much human experience in a

restricted number of pages. *The Gossips*, for example, tells the story of a romantic adventure which is in itself significant and tragic. A merchant, who stops by chance at the entrance to an inn, relates how a woman once loved him, and was driven to crime by her love. The conversation between the merchants and peasants ends, and he departs. The others will never see him again, but his words have illuminated something in their own hearts which up to now has remained shadowy and unformulated: passion, hatred and despair. The love of the merchant is not an isolated phenomenon, but is bound up with a whole world of adventures and love-affairs, just as everything on earth influences that which surrounds it.

*The Mission* is nothing more than the account of a night spent in an *izba* with the body of a suicide, a night which ends in a friend's house, in a warm and comfortable room, while the snow storm moans outside. The reader seems to find himself between two doors, one of which opens on to a world of joy and freedom from care, the other on to a terrifying and sordid universe. There is no hint of blame or praise. Things are like that, and that is the simple truth.

Then there is *The Student*. On a spring night, a young man, warming himself by the fire, talks with two peasant women about the death of Christ. Then they part. The story leaves an impression like a chord in music, extraordinarily tender and pure. One glimpses the life of the student and of the poor women, and one hears, like an echo, the confused murmur of past generations. A bare three pages, but they have more significance and depth than a long novel.

Nevertheless, when Chekhov does pick out one person from the others in a crowd, he deliberately avoids choosing some moment of crisis in his life when talking about him. One other writer who followed Chekhov's example with incomparable mastery was Katherine Mansfield. There can be no doubt that



it was Chekhov who taught her the secret—always go for the ordinary, the everyday, and not the exceptional.

There is *Vanka*, for example, the little shoemaker's apprentice, who is writing to his grandfather in the village. It is one day among the rest for Vanka, neither more joyous nor more wretched than any other: and perhaps it is this very fact that moves us. Or take the admirable *Toska* (*Yearning*): a coachman has lost his son, and finding no one to whom he can talk of his death, ends by pouring out his grief to his horse. Nothing actually happens, and there is no *incident*, but instead, the evocation of a whole terrible destiny.

But reality itself (except in extraordinary times) is poor in events. The reader recognises himself in these average lives and quiet, monotonous days. He recognises and discovers himself. For all too often the moment of crisis precipitates in him a being that is not himself, and no doubt he is only his true self in a state of calm and tedium.

Lastly, Chekhov, even if he devotes only half a page to a character, manages to let us see all his inner life. Maupassant and Mérimée depict a passion or an idiosyncrasy and are satisfied.

Remember the heroine of *The Necklace*. She is a coquettish young woman, nothing more. Or look at Falcone: he is a Corsican with a sense of honour. We need not look any further, for that is all. But Chekhov's horse-thieves, on the other hand, have a rich, complex, colourful inner life. (*The Thieves*.)

He has a superb way of describing very simple and primitive people, peasants and vagabonds. But he is not so successful when he takes an intellectual as his hero. The background he creates for these stories is less striking, and does not hold our interest so well. In *A Dull Story*, *The Duel*, and *The Neighbours*, the men and women are cultured and well educated. Too often, their conversation only has the air of profundity, and their desires and

day-dreams are imagined, not real. Chekhov lacked the gift that Tolstoy had to such a high degree: the gift of discovering the ordinary in the exceptional. Chekhov is overcome by a sort of timidity when he describes people above the average: he has not Tolstoy's supreme ease.

Chekhov's stories are sad. He denied that he was a pessimist, because certain of his characters proclaim that 'in two or three hundred years, life will be marvellous'. But one cannot read Chekhov for long without feeling sad at heart. Maupassant was a pessimist, for the naturalist writers saw life in sombre hues: but there is something childish in such a conception of life when one compares it with that of Chekhov. Maupassant's heroes suffer because they are poor, or old, or ill: the causes of their despair are all external. But for Chekhov, the evil comes from the fact that, in his eyes, life has no meaning.

To a woman who loved him, and who had asked: 'What is the meaning of life?' he gave the weary reply:

'You ask me, what is life? It is just as if you had said: What is a carrot? A carrot is a carrot, that's all there is to it.'

In the same way, Tusenbach, in *The Three Sisters*, says:

'In a million years, life will be the same: it does not change; it remains constant; following its own laws, which are no use to us, or at least, which we will never know. The birds, the storks, for instance, just fly back and forth and whatever big or little thoughts stray through their heads, they will still go on flying without knowing the reason where or why. They fly and will fly, whatever philosophers happen to be among them; and let them philosophise as much as they like, so long as they go on flying . . .'

*Masha*: All the same, is there a meaning?

*Tusenbach*: A meaning . . . Look at the snow falling. What meaning is there in that?

A calm disenchantment—sometimes even against his will—

permeates every line of his writings, and gives them their peculiar accent, at once lucid, gentle and serene.

Chekhov took care over the smallest details of style and composition in his writing. In order to understand what a difficult task of self-perfection he had to undertake, one has only to read his early stories and those of his last years, and note the difference. Towards the end of his life, 'he no longer wrote, but drew his stories'. But above all, he thought continually about his art. There was as much reflection and design in his stories as instinct. He looked for simplicity first and foremost: the sentences should be as short as possible, each word saying what it was intended to say, and nothing more. He had discovered the ideal for descriptive writing, he said, in a school-boy's exercise-book. 'The sea was big', the child had written, and the author averred that one could not put it better. Simplicity, terseness, reticence—these were the most important things. Things should be suggested, not explained, and the story should advance gently and evenly. 'My instinct tells me that the end of a story should artificially focus in the reader's mind the impression of the story as a whole.'

Chekhov examined every problem that is likely to confront a writer. He was forced to write quickly, forever in a rush, yet his tales are masterpieces of delicacy and patience. 'One day in my presence,' Maxim Gorky wrote, 'Tolstoy was speaking with admiration of one of Chekhov's stories: *Chérie*, I think it was. He said: "It is like a piece of lace embroidered by a chaste young girl; there were, in the old days, young girls, lace-makers, who used to work like that . . ."' Tolstoy spoke with feeling, with tears in his eyes. Chekhov had a temperature that day; he was sitting with bowed head and red patches on his cheeks, carefully cleaning his glasses. He was silent for a long time; finally, with a sigh, he said timidly in a low voice:

"There are . . . some printer's errors . . ."

Katherine Mansfield, to whom any discussion of Chekhov always returns, for she was his spiritual heir, firmly believed at the end of her life that the writer, in perfecting and raising himself morally, perfects and raises his art. Chekhov never formulated any such teaching, but his whole life serves to illustrate its truth. The qualities of Chekhov as a man—his modesty and integrity, his simplicity, his constant effort to discipline and improve himself, to love his neighbour, to put up with illness and anxiety, and to await death fearlessly and with dignity—are reflected in the work of Chekhov as a writer. He who so sadly asserted that life had no meaning, succeeded in giving a very beautiful and very deep meaning to his own.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

CHEKHOV had formed a friendship with his publisher, Suvorin. Suvorin was a curious figure, and one of the most detested men of his day, being a reactionary and, even more, an opportunist. Yet it seems Suvorin was worth more than his reputation, if one can judge by the *Memoirs* he left, which were not intended to reach the public, and did so only through a chance series of events.

Alexis Suvorin, like Chekhov, came from the people; he was the grandson of a serf. He had begun his career as a schoolmaster, teaching geography in a remote village in the centre of Russia, where he was paid 14 roubles 60 kopecks a month. He was married and had a child. He wanted to become a journalist, and that meant living near Moscow, so he rented an *izba* for his family ten versts from the city. When his wife went to Moscow, she used to walk the distance on foot, and in order to save her shoes, took them off and carried them in her hand, going bare-foot through the dust. A short time afterwards, when Suvorin wanted to try his luck in St. Petersburg, he had to borrow an overcoat from a friend to make the journey. He was appointed secretary on the editorial side of a newspaper. A hard worker, he no doubt also knew how to yield to the demands of those in power, and scent the way the wind was blowing. Soon he had become director of the largest daily paper in Russia, the *Novoe*

*Vremya*; he also owned several big publishing houses; and lastly, the newspaper stands on all railway stations became his property, and earned him immense profits. Shchedrin had nicknamed him wittily in the phrase, 'What does the gentleman want?' which the jealous readily adopted, for he endeavoured in everything to defend the government's viewpoint, earning more and more favours in return. But in the pages of his diary, which has been published in the U.S.S.R., he reveals his real attitude to events, and to the men who then led Russia, and treats them without indulgence. Chekhov respected him for his literary taste, his intelligence and intuition, and he himself felt a boundless admiration for Chekhov. The two got on very well: they travelled together, and shared common tastes for books, fishing, plays and even for cemeteries.

23rd March, 1896.

'To-day is the Saturday before Easter. I went with Chekhov to visit Gorbunov's grave; we opened the lantern hanging on the cross, took out the lamp that was inside, and lit it. I said: "Christ is risen, Ivan Fyodorovich".' (*Memoirs of Suvorin.*)

Having thus saluted the dead, Chekhov and Suvorin continued on their way across the cemetery. Suvorin pointed out that the graves were very near to the Neva, and that he, Suvorin, would certainly be buried there.

'My soul will leave the coffin', he said, 'and go down underground to the river. There, it will find some fish whose body it will enter and swim about in.'

Chekhov listened perfectly seriously, tugging thoughtfully at his small, blonde beard. He had changed and aged a great deal in the past few years. His body had grown thin and fragile, his large hands were dry and burning with fever; he wore pince-nez, and his tired face was deeply lined. 'He looked like a country doctor,' Kuprin said, 'or a schoolmaster in a provincial town . . .' At first glance, he appeared quite ordinary, 'but afterwards one

saw the most beautiful, sensitive and inspired of human faces.'

Chekhov and Suvorin saw the coronation celebrations together. 'The days of the coronation', wrote Suvorin in his diary with a curiously prophetic accent, 'have been clear and burning. This reign, too, will be a burning one. But what will it burn, and whom?' (*Memoirs of Suvorin.*)

Both of them had a passion for the theatre. Suvorin himself dabbled in writing plays. He sometimes complained of theatrical people who, he said, bored him to death. But he always added:

'I can't tear myself away from the theatre. There's something in it that fascinates me.'

Chekhov himself, paying visits to actors and breathing the dusty air of the wings, found an element of warmth and life that he had always lacked. The theatre was a great consolation to the two friends.

Both of them, furthermore, felt a certain disdain for men: cynical in Suvorin's case, gentle and disabused in the case of Chekhov. Returning from the East, Chekhov had found himself surrounded by a curious atmosphere 'of undefined ill-will . . . People keep asking me to dine, and launch into clumsy dithyrambics, and are ready at the same time to tear me limb from limb. Why? The devil only knows. If I put a bullet through my head, I would give nine-tenths of my friends and admirers the greatest pleasure.'

There were many causes for this ill-will; Chekhov had inspired much affection, and now people were tired of their affection. He was envied for having attained fame so young. Some critics reproached him bitterly with considering himself a genius, whereas he was merely a 'young writer who had been fortunate'.

The hatred which Suvorin inspired among some people also rebounded on Chekhov. He was pressed on all sides to give up the friendship, and naturally he only clung to it the more.

It was this coldness and injustice on the part of the public and the critics (Chekhov said of the latter: 'They are not men, but a kind of mildew'), and the feeling of solitude and incomprehension, that finally matured him as a writer. He clung the more fiercely to his spiritual independence, and now even rose in revolt against Tolstoy himself. That wonderful story, *Ward 6*, written in 1892, marks the moment when Chekhov finally rejected the influence of Tolstoy. He would never cease to respect the artist and to love the man, and to consider him 'the greatest of all'. But he could no longer obey him in his heart. He would not idealise the people:

'In my veins flows the blood of a *mouzhik*, and the virtues of the *mouzhik* do not astonish me.'

He was a doctor and, as such, could not feel the same contempt for science and progress that Tolstoy had done: it seemed to him that 'the man who was able to harness steam did more for the good of humanity than if he had refused to eat meat or lived in chastity'. Nor could he agree any longer with the theory of inner perfection, which in Tolstoy's eyes was the sole remedy for every evil. Everything he saw around him and within himself—Russia which he had just traversed from Moscow to Sakhalin, Western Europe which he admired—told him that life in Russia was bad and must be changed, turned upside down if need be, and that one could not sink into a sort of nirvana, into the vain contemplation of one's own soul.

Hence the theme of *Ward 6*. The scene is a provincial hospital, gloomy and squalid, over which rules a brutal and drunken male attendant. The doctor lets things slide, assuring his patients that everything on earth is relative, that the sum of unhappiness is the same for the man who lives in opulence and the man who dies of hunger, and that one can be as free in the bowels of a prison as on the steppe, as happy in a hospital bed as in a palace. They are fine and consoling phrases! But one day the doctor himself falls



ill: he is declared mad and locked up. The attendant beats him, and he suffers. Too late, then, he understands what others have suffered through his fault.

All Russia interpreted the story as a symbol in one way or another . . . *Ward 6*, with its barred windows, was the empire, and it was easy to give the brutal attendant a name. The doctor, lacking will power and courage, stood for the whole of the 'intelligentsia'. But was this what Chekhov really meant when he wrote *Ward 6*? Had he risen against Tolstoy's doctrine, or was he really criticising the regime? Or even the whole of human nature? Or had he confined himself to painting an accurate and truthful picture, without worrying about its significance? One cannot say with certainty, but the public itself was convinced, and that was the main thing. *Ward 6* contributed greatly to Chekhov's fame in Russia; because of it, the U.S.S.R. claims him for its own, and asserts that had he lived he would have belonged to the Marxist party. Posthumous fame is not without its surprises . . .

Meanwhile, the writer himself was not happy, feeling a lack of both love and understanding. He considered his own life useless. 'Why does one write?' he asked with a sigh. 'For money? But in any case, I never have any.'

So he sought a refuge in the countryside that he had always loved. He never tired of describing in his stories those 'poetic, melancholy and abandoned' dwellings, which gave him such a morbid and voluptuous pleasure. He had happened one summer to rent one floor of a half-ruined house; he slept 'in an immense colonnaded room, in which the only furniture was the divan he used as a bed, and a table . . . Even on calm days, something rattled in the old stoves, and when a storm was raging, the whole house shook and seemed to be cracking in two, and it was rather frightening, especially at night, when all ten big windows were lit up by lightning.'

From his youth on, he had dreamed of buying an estate.

'We've never had a place to ourselves', he said to his brothers.

'It's a great pity.'

In 1892 he acquired an estate called Melikhovo.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

**T**OLSTOY taught that possession was an evil. But Chekhov welcomed the idea of being a property-owner with joy. Merely the thought of having no more rent to pay was intoxicating. Melikhovo, when the Chekhovs took up residence there, was mantled in ice and snow, and the house, built in the centre of a large, empty space, seemed as if abandoned in the middle of 'a miniature Siberia'. The family was disappointed. No one could understand why Anton was so overjoyed, but then, for a long time past, they had given up trying to understand him. He, however, was well content with the isolated house and the tranquil study 'with three large windows'. He rose early, and worked not only mentally but physically, which was a new and delicious experience. He himself scoured the courtyard, threw the heavy snow into the pond, and broke the ice. In the yard, he intended to lay out a garden, and plant fruit trees, with roses for effect. While his two unfortunate elder brothers had instinctively spoiled and destroyed everything around them, Anton Pavlovich was impelled in quite a different direction: towards raising and beautifying and building. After having suffered so much from the unruliness of others, he established in his own and his family's life a strict, almost monkish, discipline. He woke at four, and spent a long time

strolling in the garden, which under his care was taking life and shape. His two dogs, Bromide and Quinine, two extremely intelligent basset-hounds, with bandy legs and long bodies, accompanied him. Lunch was at midday, and afterwards a siesta. Then, until evening, he wrote. 'I would like', he told Suvorin, 'to be a little bald old man, and to sit in a comfortable room before a big table, and write and write.' 'Literature has one good thing about it,' he added with a smile, 'that one can sit pen in hand for days on end without noticing how time goes by, and yet feel at the same time something resembling life.' In the evenings, he and his father sat up alone in the quiet house, he writing still, while his father hummed litanies and recited prayers in an undertone. Age, and the comfort and respect with which he was surrounded, had improved and softened the old man—it would have been difficult to recognise in him now the despot of former days, the shopkeeper with his upraised fist and mouth full of curses.

Chekhov showed himself a respectful and devoted son, and his father kept his place: but there was a curious awkwardness between them. Chekhov could not entirely forget the past, his harsh childhood and the blows he had received . . . His father was both submissive, and secretly irritated.

'To-day at table,' Chekhov wrote, 'Vissarion (that was the name his brothers and himself had given the domestic tyrant in their youth) was holding forth: he said that ignorant people were worth more than educated ones. Then I came in, and he stopped.' (*Letter to Alexander, 11th March, 1897.*)

The rest of the family adored Anton and, with the best intentions in the world, made life unbearable for him. One day, his brother Alexander came to see him at Melikhovo, spent a little time there, then left again, and while waiting for the train at a small country station, wrote him the following letter:

'Altosha,

'I left Melikhovo without having said good-bye to Altrimantran (this was another of their father's nicknames). He was asleep, and may God be with him! May he dream of salmon and olives. Our mother said that I was hurting her by going . . . Our sister became very sad when I got into the carriage. All that is in the order of things. What is not in the order of things is my state of mind. Don't be angry if I fled in cowardly fashion. I feel terribly sorry for you. I am also a weak man, and cannot look coldly on another person's sorrow. I suffered all the time as I watched you, and the frightful life you lead . . . They all, without exception, wish you well, but the result is a complete misunderstanding. In order to allay these misunderstandings and mutual vexations, the tears and unavoidable sufferings and stifled sighs, only one course lies open—as you recently decided, you must leave, alone.

'Our mother fails absolutely to understand you, and will never understand you. She suffers deeply, but because you are sick and irritable. She will never manage to understand your mind. Yesterday in the forest, father again told me that no one listens to him. He is intelligent. Grandfather was a steward, *ergo* . . . You are a good and excellent man. God has given you a spark (of talent). With that spark, you are at home anywhere. Whatever it costs, you must keep your soul alive. Abandon everything: your dreams of a country life, your love for Melikhovo, and all the feeling and work you have poured into it. There are other Melikhovos in the world. What sense is there in letting Altrimantran devour your soul like rats devour a candle. And it's not hard to devour it . . .'

As a child, Anton Pavlovich had managed to preserve his inner freedom, and keep 'his soul alive', through his day-dreams

and silences and by a gentle, ironical resignation. As a grown man, sick and famous, they were the same remedies which saved him. Nature was his greatest consolation.

'When I see the spring,' he wrote to Suvorin, 'I hope desperately that there is a paradise in the next world.' (17th March, 1892.) He whiled away long hours fishing at the pond with rod and line.

One day a visitor discovered with astonishment that the pond did not contain a single fish. But here at least, seated on the bank, Chekhov was happy. What most struck those who saw him for the first time was his curious calm. His movements were gentle and delicate, his conversation simple and concise, and his voice cold, but his smile was still that of a child. (*Bunin's Recollections.*)

'He has a broad, white forehead, of an admirable shape,' wrote Kuprin, who made his acquaintance about this time, 'but just recently there have appeared, between the eyebrows, at the base of the nose, two thoughtful, vertical creases.'

Kuprin noted further: 'His eyes, which were not blue, as they seemed at first sight, but darker, almost brown . . . Because of the pince-nez, and the way he had of peering under his glasses while throwing his head back a little, his expression sometimes seemed severe . . .'

But then, 'in his sad eyes gleamed a smile, and the tiny wrinkles on his temples quivered; his voice was deep and soft and veiled . . .' (*Memoirs of Maxim Gorky.*)

He was growing thinner every day, coughing, ageing; he said of himself: 'I am like a drowned man.' But he continued stubbornly to dismiss his illness, and poor health never prevented him conscientiously fulfilling his duty as a doctor. Sick as he was, he did not hesitate to go out at night, in all weathers, spending hours in a carriage on terrible roads, looking after the peasants in their squalid *izbas*.

'Of all the doctors (in the district), I am the most unfortunate; my horses and carriage are worthless; I don't know the roads; I have no money; at night, I can see nothing, I grow tired very quickly, and here is the essential point—I can never forget that I must write, and I have a great urge to send the cholera packing and settle down to writing . . . My solitude is complete.' (*Letter to Suvorin, 7th August, 1892.*)

'I am bored. Not to belong to oneself, to think only of diarrhoea cases, to tremble at night when the dogs bark and someone knocks at the door (they must be coming to fetch me), to travel with bad horses over unknown roads, to read only books about cholera, simply to wait for the cholera and to be at the same time completely indifferent to the illness itself and the people one is caring for . . .' he sighed in another letter. (*Letter to Suvorin, 16th August, 1892.*)

But he was a doctor, and not for a moment would he have dreamt of neglecting his duty. As a writer, he found his material in the spectacle of the wretched sufferers. He grew still thinner, and coughed up blood. 'My soul is tired', he wrote, but his work was enriched by his own and others' sufferings.

From his memories of Melikhovo, he wrote two long short stories, which are almost novels: *The Peasants*, and *In The Ravine*. Inevitably, the manner in which Chekhov described the *mouzhiks* was a profound shock to the intelligentsia of his day, 'these people', as Gorky remarked with stinging irony, 'who have been trying all their lives to understand why it is uncomfortable to sit on two chairs at once'.

The intelligentsia had continually idealised the *mouzhik*, without taking the trouble to get to know him. It did not occur to educated Russians to go and live in an *izba*, breathe in the acrid smell given off by the peasant, talk to him and observe how he lived and loved, and how he treated his wife and children; but, parrot-like, they continued to repeat the lesson of Tolstoy

and Turgenev: 'The *mouzhik* is good, the *mouzhik* is a saint.'

This was not in the least a rational conviction on the part of the intelligentsia, but a political attitude. They wanted liberal reforms. The government refused them, on the pretext that the people was not ripe for freedom. The best way to irritate the government was to prove to it that the *mouzhik* was an extraordinary being of lofty moral stature; thus it was deprived of its best weapons, which was all the bourgeoisie wanted.

But Chekhov knew the peasants, firstly by instinct, for their blood ran in his veins, and secondly because he visited them and treated them, talked with them and forced himself to regard them as equals. He realised clearly that the intelligentsia was mistaken. The Russian peasants were not saints. There were among them those gentle and resigned natures forever doomed to be victims, like Lina (*In The Ravine*), like Olga of *The Peasants*. But in general, there was much harshness and bestiality in their savage, miserable lives. Chekhov saw in the peasants human beings whom prolonged serfdom had turned almost into beasts, and whose relationship to the divine could be seen only in flashes, yet strikingly and movingly.

They lived in dark, cramped, dirty houses. 'And the flies! The stove was aslant, the logs of which the walls were made had been laid awry, and it seemed as though the *izba* was on the point of falling in ruins.' (*The Peasants*.) The *mouzhik* was cruel to animals ('The cat's deaf' 'Why?' 'They beat her. '), children, women, all creatures without defence. His poverty was appalling: his food consisted of black bread soaked in water, with, on feast days, a herring added. When the peasant was poor, his only passion was to get drunk, and when he was rich, to grow richer, and to that end he would stop at nothing but would steal and even murder if necessary. The women were either corrupt and grasping or cowering creatures, ill with fear from childhood. In an outburst of furious rage, Aksinya kills her sister-in-



law's son. (*In The Ravine.*) The *mouzhik* knew nothing of pity. His religion was a purely external one: 'Maria and Fyokla crossed themselves, observed the fast days each year, but understood nothing. They did not teach the children their prayers, nor talk to them of God . . . they merely stopped them eating meat during Lent . . . At the same time, everyone revered the Holy Scriptures; they loved them tenderly and devotedly, but there were no books and no one could read.' (*The Peasants.*)

Whenever the old people fell ill, the children told them they had lived too long, and that it was time to die. The peasant felt that he was abandoned by everyone; no one helped him or advised him. 'Those who were richer and stronger were not able to help them, because they themselves were coarse, dishonest and drunken.' (*The Peasants.*) 'Poverty! Poverty!' was Chekhov's constant cry. It was not freedom, but material well-being these creatures needed. But it was easy to demand freedom for them, for that depended on the goodwill of the Tsar, whereas to give the peasant material well-being meant encroaching upon the privileges of the wealthy classes, which no one desired. For that reason, Chekhov's stories of peasant life gave no pleasure to his educated readers.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

CHEKHOV had a friend called Levitan, a painter. One day, in the spring of 1892, the two men went out shooting together in the country. Levitan, almost involuntarily, winged a bird which fell at his feet. 'It had a long beak, large dark eyes, and fine plumage . . . It looked at us with astonishment,' wrote Chekhov. What were they to do? Levitan pulled a wry face, closed his eyes, and begged in a trembling voice:

'Finish it off . . .'

'I can't,' Chekhov said.

The bird continued to stare in front of it 'with astonishment'. Finally, Chekhov killed it. 'One lovely, amorous creature less, and two imbeciles returned home and sat down to table.' (18th April, 1892.)

There were many visitors to the country that year, with music, long walks round the edge of the pond, warm nights, young girls in love. It was the atmosphere of that spring, the beautiful garden, the moonlit nights, and the death of the innocent bird, that Chekhov recaptured in the play which he wrote some little time later: *The Seagull*.

'I wrote it *forte*, and finished it *pianissimo*, contrary to all the rules of dramatic art. The result has been a short story. I am more discontented than satisfied and, reading through my new-born play, have once more convinced myself that I am not a

writer of drama. The acts are very short. There are four of them.'

In *The Seagull*, a young girl loves a famous writer; she wants to become an actress. Her dream comes true, but brings her nothing but disillusionment and grief, and leads to the death of the man who loved her. It is a tender, lyrical play, all written in half-tones and treated, in fact, rather like a short story. Even when read, it appeared strange, new and incomprehensible. Chekhov wrote it for the Alexandra Theatre in St. Petersburg, remembering the triumph *Ivanov* had enjoyed there a few years earlier. A very great actress, Kommissarevskaya, then at the beginning of her career, was to play the role of the young girl, Nina. But there were not enough rehearsals: the play was produced in nine days. The first performance was fixed for the 17th October, 1896.

Chekhov himself, only half-satisfied with his work, did not expect a great success. But at least he knew that he was loved and respected by the public. If he did not foresee a triumph, neither did he expect a failure, but simply an average success. In Suvorin's box, he wore his usual air of calm and resignation. The theatre was crowded when the curtain rose. From the first passages of dialogue, Chekhov sensed around him the same atmosphere of ill-will that he had already noticed several times since his return from Sakhalin Island, six years before. Murmurs arose, and people were yawning. On the stage, Nina, in a white dress, was reciting the famous monologue:

' . . . Men, lions, eagles and partridges, horned deer, geese, spiders, silent fish . . . '

Someone laughed.

'There's a smell of sulphur,' one of the actors had to say. 'Is that as it should be?'

A further burst of laughter.

'So this is the Chekhov you were calling a genius,' one of the audience murmured to his neighbour.

'Me? I never said any such thing!'

An obscure writer put in:

'He has no talent, none . . .'

'He wanted to astonish people, to do something striking and original, and just look at the stupid twaddle he's produced as a result!'

Meanwhile, the play went on. The audience pretended to listen, then there were shoulder-shruggings and fresh ripples of laughter. Chekhov's friends were looking for him in the auditorium, and from the box where he was sitting, he heard them asking aloud, in pitying tones:

'Where is the poor fellow?'

The critics were mentally reviewing the phrases they would write the following day: 'An unprecedented scandal . . . It is long since we have seen such a thundering failure. This *Seagull* is a fitting exhibit for a chamber of horrors.'

The more temperate confined themselves to pointing out complacently that the play was written in defiance of all the rules of the theatre: Chekhov had never known how to write for the stage.

'Ivanov, you remember . . . It shows the audience's first reaction was the right one . . .'

'Yes, the instinct of the public is a great thing . . .'

Besides, even Chekhov's short stories were not as good as people made out. As for *The Seagull*! . . .

'It's the donkey trying to imitate the lion,' someone murmured loud enough to be overheard, and a critic noted the phrase with a smile, to use it in his next day's article. (The critic's name was Selivanov, and thanks to the judgement he pronounced on *The Seagull*, his name survived for a long time in Russia: at each triumphal performance of the play, there was always someone present to recall the unfortunate Selivanov's words.)

The theatre seemed to be filled with Chekhov's personal enemies. All those who felt jealous of him, those to whom he had unwittingly given insult, who had had to give way in some paper for one of Chekhov's stories, now took their revenge. And to their number must be added those who merely howled with the pack, who feared every innovation in art and in life, the fools and false friends—a great many people.

Suvorin in a rage remembered that he had written his article in advance, banking on a success. Now it must all be rewritten. But who would have dreamt of such a failure? The first performance of *Ivanov* in Moscow had been a triumph compared to this. Besides, when one stopped to consider, the public was not altogether wrong. The play was strange. While reading it, he had liked it, but there was no action. Chekhov never listened to anyone; now he was biting his nails. He was a curious fellow . . . He had a good deal of pride. He either did not listen to advice or soon rejected it with an impatient gesture. Could it be true that, for some time past, he had been toying with liberal notions? Some said it was so . . . Everything was possible.

Chekhov was sitting behind Suvorin, in the obscure part of the box. Mme. Suvorin, with a woman's faculty for talking when it would be better to remain silent, was murmuring words of solace in an undertone. But solace was no good to Chekhov. He could hear the commotion, the shouts and laughter and whistling in the blue and gold auditorium. Even Kommissar-evskaya, it seemed to him, was playing badly—yet during rehearsals one could not hear her without being moved to tears.

The second act was calmer. But during the third, the audience seemed smitten with a malignant madness. Quietly, Chekhov withdrew from the box.

After the performance, Suvorin looked for him in the auditorium and could not find him. At two in the morning, Marie Chekhov arrived, pale and tear-stained, at the Suvorins,

telling them that Anton had not returned home and that she feared for him. In the meantime, Anton was walking through the cold, damp streets of St. Petersburg. It was autumn. The first snow was falling at Melikhovo. Why had he left the countryside? Tomorrow, he decided, he would return and shut himself up there. Failure moved him less than the thought that he was too old, too tired, that he would never again do anything worth while, that he had written too much and that 'the machine had finally broken down . . .'

Gradually, he grew calmer. When he returned home, it was three o'clock. He took a cold bath and went to bed. He was still asleep when the anxious Suvorin burst into his room. He wanted to turn on the lights, but Chekhov, from his bed, cried out:

'I implore you, no lights! I don't want to see anybody. I only want to tell you this: let them call me a—— if I ever write for the theatre again.'

He departed for Melikhovo. The second performance of *The Seagull* was successful. But the evil had been done: people had read the critics' spiteful articles. The play was given five performances, and with that its St. Petersburg run drew to a close.

Chekhov published it a little later. Tolstoy read it, and gave his opinion in these words:

'It is absolutely worthless: it is written like Ibsen's dramas.'

'You know that I don't like Shakespeare,' he said to Chekhov himself with a smile. 'But your drama, dear Anton Pavlovich, is even worse than his.'

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

**I**N the country, Chekhov looked after the peasants and gave them treatment, organised schools, and improved the roads. But it was impossible in Russia for an intelligent man to feel satisfied with his activities, however beneficent they might be. The country was too vast, the misery too deep-rooted, and human patience soon wore thin. What was the use of cleaning and dressing a scratch on a body covered with mortal wounds? A few dozen human beings were saved, and thousands died. What could one road mean in that immense empire, or one school for those unlettered masses? Political issues complicated everything. Famine visited Russia every five or six years, bringing cholera in its train, yet the wealthy refused to give any money because of the rumours, nearly all distorted, which circulated concerning the bad administration of funds collected for charity. It was even affirmed that the Red Cross stole the money entrusted to it. Furthermore, the government discouraged all private initiative in the matter. Chekhov made a vain attempt to found a sort of relief committee. He came up against the mistrust of some, and the plain ill-will of others. In the end, the government forbade all private action. Once more, Chekhov was seized by a feeling of sadness, vexation and weariness, as after his journey to Sakhalin Island. In addition, his own illness had grown worse.

In March of 1897 he happened to be in Moscow for several days. Suvorin invited him to dinner, but hardly had Chekhov arrived at the restaurant when he felt unwell, and began to spit blood. He asked for ice, and tried to suck a few fragments of it, but the blood, 'red and menacing as a flame', would not stop.

His friends hovered round him in consternation. They tried to minimize the affair, and Suvorin insisted that only the throat was affected, but Chekhov himself now knew that the blood was coming from his right lung. He remembered Nicholas' death. The truth that he had glimpsed, then lost sight of, now reappeared once more, '. . . cruel and terrible. If, after death, the individual disappears, there is no such thing as life. I cannot console myself with the thought that I shall mingle with the sighs and torments of some universal life, whose end is unknown to me . . . It is terrible to become nothing. You are carried to the cemetery, then people go home and drink tea . . . It's disgusting to think of it.'

Meanwhile, the haemorrhage would not stop. He felt a little better at home, but after several hours the bleeding started again, and he had to be taken to a Moscow clinic. When his temperature did drop and the haemorrhage ceased, he tried to joke about it as usual, but the doctors would not let him talk; he remained stretched out, without speaking, his hands behind his head, terribly pale. Flowers were brought to him, and young writers sent him their manuscripts, asking for advice and corrections. Since he was ill, and could not write, they might as well profit by it . . .

He made no complaint. Neither then nor later did he try to draw attention to himself or arouse pity. When asked how he felt, he would reply, 'Not bad', and change the conversation. When asked if he was bored in the hospital—

'Of course not', he said. 'You know, I'm almost used to it.'

In order to distract him, they told him what was going on in



the outside world. It was spring, and the ice was breaking up. 'When one is treating a peasant with consumption,' he told Suvorin, 'he always says: Nothing will cure me, the spring floods will carry me off.'

But the spring passed, and he thought that he was cured. The doctors advised a change of air. He left for Biarritz, but was driven away again by the bad weather, and went on to Nice. The journey cheered him, although his ignorance of foreign languages proved an embarrassment. 'When I speak German or French abroad, the tram conductors laugh at me, and in Paris, getting from one station to another is like a game of blindman's buff.' But at first he was happy in France. He spent the whole winter in Nice. For all his illness and fatigue and melancholy he loved life as it should be loved, for its small, passing joys. He rejoiced at the fine weather, the sea at Nice, 'moving and caressing', new faces and foreign ways ('We should live here to learn courtesy and refinement. The chambermaid smiles like a duchess on the stage—yet one can see at the same time by her face that she is tired out with work. One exchanges salutations on entering a railway compartment . . . Even with beggars, one says "monsieur, madame",') the carnival, and French books, even the almanacs which he read with delight. He became an impassioned supporter of Dreyfus, and from that time dates his coldness towards Suvorin, who was reactionary and anti-Dreyfus in his views. He had the greatest sympathy for France, and seemed to understand her and sense her virtues better than most Europeans. 'How this people suffers and pays for the others, going ahead of them and setting the tone for European culture!'

For all that, the gentlest of exiles was no longer bearable: he longed for Russia. In October of 1898 his father died: the country house was sold, and Chekhov went to live at Yalta in the Crimea.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

**I** LIVE like a monk', Chekhov used to say jokingly. In reality, he was the most human of men, and women's beauty aroused in him feelings quite unlike those of desire, shame and hatred which Tolstoy felt. In a much more normal and simple fashion, he felt the charm of women and love just as other men do. But throughout his youth he remained fiercely on his guard against any real attachment. Brief and light-hearted adventures, affectionate friendships and a gentle camaraderie provided the tenor of his emotional life. 'I should like to fall in love,' he said sometimes, 'life is dull without true love.' Women liked him. They were attracted by his intelligence and sense of humour, by his weakness and by the serene melancholy which they sensed in him; but as soon as the game went too far, as soon as Chekhov felt that the whole of his affections and his very life were being laid claim to, he withdrew into himself; but this he did with so much grace that it was impossible to bear him any grudge, and the disappointed mistress (not without some pangs) was changed into a friend.

He knew that he was ill; he had a family to look after, and little money; he thought of himself as old, and already finished at forty. He did not see what a woman would do, continually at his side.

'I am quite prepared to marry,' he wrote in half-ironical,

half-serious tone, 'but give me a wife who, like the moon, will not always be on my horizon. She in Moscow, myself in the country . . .'

Perhaps he was a little afraid of the women who surrounded him. They were cultured, charming and refined, but it was the fashion at that time to be misunderstood, discontented with oneself and with life, to desire and wait for something, to sigh and yearn . . . Doubtless many were sincere, but for many more, such a state of mind was a pose, and Chekhov could not take it seriously. As soon as any young woman showed signs of talking 'à la Chekhov', and of playing the role of the Seagull in real life, the writer became reticent, ironical and curiously cold.

Women do not understand how simple a man's desires are (or if they do, it is too late, and their youth is over). All Chekhov asked of them was to be beautiful, gracious and gay, to give him a little of their hearts, but not to ask too much in return: but they, like Nina in *The Seagull* and like all his heroines, were perilously ready for sacrifice, and being a wise and prudent man, he fled.

The great actress Kommissarevskaya, who had created the role of the Seagull, was one of those women whom, almost involuntarily, he attracted and later repulsed in this way.

She was a slight little thing, with great dark eyes, an extraordinarily musical voice, and a thin, inspired face. She did not regard the theatre as a job or a career but rather as something resembling a sacred mission. There were many women of this type in Russia, who went on the stage as others went to the people, or took religious vows. Art was for them a jealous god to whom one's whole life must be consecrated. In 1903, Kommissarevskaya had to play the part of Monna Vanna; she wrote: 'I do not think I can play it—I shall not be able to feel it as one should: I am too earth-bound, too much sunk in petty things . . .'

And from Moscow, on the eve of reading *Manfred*:

'So here I am—sick, without a voice, dull-eyed, and fettered by the sensation that I am powerless to rise, even by one rung, to inspiration. And perhaps I shall be a success, and the public will think it is me, never dreaming that it is an automatic art. But I shall have to rise very high now, in order to find myself . . .' It is hard for us to-day to understand this sincere and burning passion for the theatre, and the prestige it enjoyed among the people.

In the West as well, it is true, great actors were admired and adored, but the veneration lavished on them in Russia was at once purer and more primitive in character. In the West, the best actors served their art, their profession, and their public. In Russia, they looked for something even greater—for that kind of truth which was the supreme dream of Tolstoy and Chekhov alike, and of all the greatest—a truth at once ethical, social and artistic, almost a religion. Naturally, this did not prevent intrigues and third-rate acting, but generally speaking, the theatre was rich in idealism. The actors earned little money: as a young actress, in the provinces, Kommissarevskaya was paid 150 roubles a month. In the Moscow Art Theatre, an actor like Moskvín received 100 roubles a month, Knipper 75 roubles, and Meyerhold 75 roubles. But what they received from the public in return for their efforts and long, patient work could not be called merely success: it was love. One cannot even compare it with the triumphs of Sarah Bernhardt, for the audiences in Europe were different, at once more cultivated and less naïve than the Russian public. In old newspapers of the last century can be found accounts of performances given by Kommissarevskaya. She was recalled fifty times. The audience wept, threw her flowers, and did not want to let her go. She came back for yet another curtain, now in hat and coat, ready to leave, and still the cries of adoration rang out: 'Don't go! Don't leave us!

Stay with us!' Trembling and in tears, she murmured, 'I am yours'. She was sobbing, and seemed ready to collapse. In the audience, women fainted.

The European onlooker might perhaps have suspected a hint of playing to the gallery in the actress' words and in the collective hysteria of the audience. But this was not the case: there was complete sincerity on both sides, a perfect communion of spirit, and the desire for something ideal and unattainable, which had no name in any language. More than any other actress of her time, Kommissarevskaya aroused a feeling of exaltation and love in the hearts of those who acclaimed her.

But in spite of her triumphs, she was not happy. By nature she was restless, frail and nervous. She constantly doubted her own powers, and became disheartened at the slightest setback in real life or on the stage. There was an extraordinary physical resemblance between her and the Seagull of Chekhov's invention; a pale, fragile little figure, with great eyes set in a tragic, child-like face, she seemed predestined for the role of Nina. And, by a strange coincidence, the imaginary life of the actress Nina and the real life of the actress Vera Kommissarevskaya were also alike.

Vera Fyodorovna had been unhappy in her youth. Married at nineteen, she had almost at once been brutally deceived, when her own sister became her husband's mistress. For the sake of the child born from this adulterous union, Vera Kommissarevskaya agreed to a divorce; with her romantic and chivalrous, melancholy and ardent temperament, which always drove her to extremes, she took all the blame upon herself, and having done so, felt she would die of grief. It was not until eight years later that she went into the theatre. She was then twenty-nine, an age at which Russian actresses were already half-way through their career.

After having played on provincial stages, she was engaged by

the Alexandra Theatre in St. Petersburg. She was shy and sensitive, and the imperial theatres were administered in a cold, impersonal manner. Furthermore, everything about them—repertory, production, and style of acting—was antiquated and dead, and Kommissarevskaya was greeted with mistrust by actors and audiences alike. She had been acting for barely two months, and had had only one success, in a play by Ostrovsky, when she was offered the part of Nina in Chekhov's *The Seagull*. She read the play one evening, was deeply stirred, and agreed to play the part: but inwardly she trembled, dreading a failure.

*The Seagull* was a play written in a highly individual manner, and one quite new for that period. The production should also have been undertaken from a new approach, for here, it was not declamatory speeches, flamboyant gestures and cries of passion that were needed, but silences, reticence, and a tone of gentle melancholy. Nor were stars sufficient for such a play: it demanded a perfectly co-ordinated team—in fact, a revolution in theatrical art, which was not to come until two years later, with Stanislavsky, Nemirovich-Danchenko, and the Moscow Art Theatre. We have already seen what a cruel and undeserved failure it suffered. Vera Fyodorovna had thrown herself heart and soul into the part, for the *Seagull* was in some degree herself. A good actor always enters into the role he is playing: but here it was something more, a true affinity of souls. Yet failure greeted it, a deep humiliation for the author, and a grievous blow for the actress.

She was crying as she left the stage, and on returning home, she sobbed again in her mother's arms, 'weeping for Chekhov, for *The Seagull*, and for herself', as the latter said.

A few months later she learned of Anton Pavlovich's serious illness. She wrote to him: 'Do what I ask, for my sake. It's mad to write: "For my sake!" but you must be sensible of the way I ask it! At Rostov-on-the-Don there is a Doctor Vassilev. You

must go there and put yourself in his care: he will cure you. Do it! Do it! I don't know how to ask you. God keep you!' (1898.)

What answer can a man give to such a letter? Chekhov, gentle, grateful and courteous as always replied that he thanked her deeply, that she was very kind, that he would not fail to follow her advice. Naturally, he did nothing of the sort.

She came to see him in the Crimea a few years later, in the course of a theatrical tour. She had sent him her picture, to which she had added these lines (lines spoken by Nina in *The Seagull*): 'How good everything was in the old days . . . Life was so clear, warm, joyous and pure, and what feelings we had—feelings like tender, exquisite flowers . . .'

One day in St. Petersburg, in the dark wings of the Alexandra Theatre, while *The Seagull* was being rehearsed, Anton Pavlovich had come up to her, had looked at her, and said:

'My Nina had eyes like yours.'

Then he had turned and left her. But she remembered the caress of those few words . . . 'like tender, exquisite flowers . . .' Her own emotional life had been so bitter and tormented . . . but he, too, had never been happy . . . She felt sorry for him, he was so ill and weak and alone. She was grateful to him also for having created this legendary Seagull, who was not herself, yet as close to her as a sister. Vulgar, material success meant nothing to her; she wanted to give eternal life to an image which, she believed, was also partly her own. And now through her fault—for, nervous, unstable, and painfully shy as she was, she did not doubt that the fault was hers—the play had failed. It was not her pride that suffered, but her heart. She had a presentiment that Chekhov would never forgive her—or rather, that it was not a question of forgiveness, but quite simply, that he would never forget, and that between them the frightful memory of that evening could never be effaced.

Now, at Gursuf, they met again like strangers. They had

always been merely strangers to one another, there had never been anything between them. And yet . . .

The slight woman with her big eyes, so simply dressed, and the ageing man with the tired face, the little blonde beard and the schoolmaster's pince-nez—the famous writer and the actress adored by a whole country—strolled gently by the seashore, on a Crimean beach. He was to leave the following day, but she said:

'No, don't go.'

'Recite something for me,' he asked.

It was evening. He listened to her for a long time. A gale was blowing. She no longer knew whether she was Nina, a girl in love, sad and forsaken, or Vera, the great actress. But Chekhov did not for a moment forget reality, or that he must leave her the following day. (There was another woman in his life by then, but Vera did not know it.)

She said once again:

'Stay!'

The night drew on. They were silent, then she recited Nina's monologue, some verses by Pushkin, the finest pages in her repertoire, for him alone, and in that deep, pure voice that moved its hearers to tears.

At last, as he was kissing her hand, he murmured:

'I will not leave . . .'

But the following day, he was gone. She wrote after him, with words that have a pathetic, ironical ring, when one knows he was then in love with someone else:

'At Gursuf . . . I felt so much pity for you, pity and sadness mixed . . .'

She had asked him for his picture. He sent it to her, inscribed 'To Vera Fyodorovna Kommissarevskaya, 3rd August, a stormy day, with the sound of the sea, from the calm Anton Chekhov.'

To hear that he was . . . calm . . . was doubtless not what she



had hoped. Four days later, on the 7th August, she sent him a telegram: 'I have waited two days for you. We are leaving tomorrow by boat for Yalta. Your lack of perspicacity saddens me. Shall I see you? Send reply.'

He sent a reply (and this time, she had to realise that he was perspicacious enough, perhaps too much so . . .):

'In Yalta it is cold, and the sea is rough. Keep well. Be happy. May God keep you. Don't be angry with me.'

But she was not to know that 'the calm Chekhov' was thinking of another, and was no doubt reassured on remembering how melancholy, shy and solitary he was. She made no further demands. She would give him everything, and if not her love, her friendship.

'I am not angry. But when I think of your life, and what it is now, my heart is sad.'

Any other woman might have felt a wound to her pride, and to that feminine 'honour' that never accepts defeat. But she was sincere, and bore no grudge, but preserved towards him a curious, touching tenderness. Three years later, Chekhov was married. Vera wrote to him once more, asking permission to stage *The Cherry Orchard*, since she had now 'founded her own theatre'.

Chekhov refused. 'This theatre will not last a month', he wrote to his wife. But he was wrong, for it lasted five years.

They never saw each other again. He died, and she continued her strange, tormented existence. She had other love-affairs, as romantic as anything she had felt for Chekhov, but in which her partners showed more perspicacity. She had her triumphant and joyful days as an artist, but was also haunted by a perpetual restlessness, dissatisfaction and anxiety. All Russia knew her as 'the Seagull'. And she was really like a wounded bird that flies from place to place, but finds no rest.

She had reached the age of forty-seven, and was playing a

provincial tour on the remote borders of the empire, in Asia. *The Seagull* was being rehearsed and she was in her favourite role. She went to the bazaar in Samarkand, and spent an agreeable hour or so choosing old carpets and materials. A short time afterwards, she felt unwell, and discovered she had contracted that terrible epidemic illness of Asiatic Russia—smallpox. She was ill for several days, and the country waited anxiously for news. One morning, she woke up joyfully, feeling almost well: she had had 'a marvellous dream', in which she had seen Chekhov and spoken to him. Forty-eight hours later, she was dead.

No Russian writer, artist or statesman ever had such a funeral. The frail body was brought from Tashkent to St. Petersburg, from Asia back to Europe, and at every station, at every village halt, the entire populace was there to meet it: the Russian people took leave of her with tears.

## Chapter Thirty

**I**N a cold, damp hall, on a poorly lighted platform, a company of young actors were playing before Chekhov. With directors, musicians, artists and actors of talent pooling their efforts, a theatrical company had just been founded in Moscow. Nemirovich-Danchenko's dramatic school and the Society of Art and Literature founded by Stanislavsky had combined to form the Moscow Arts Theatre, which was to prove quite unlike any other.

For the time being, the theatre itself was not yet ready, as there were no funds. The company rehearsed as best they could. On that autumn evening they were playing in the Hermitage, in an icy hall which was still under construction, so dark that neither walls nor ceiling could be seen, but only vast, sad, rearing shadows. In that void, their voices had a strange, muffled resonance. There were no footlights, but instead, a row of candles stuck in bottle-necks. Outside, it was raining. Chekhov, an overcoat thrown over his shoulders, trembling with cold, and gently, with a habitual gesture, plucking at his soft beard, listened to the actors. A few days earlier, they had rehearsed *The Seagull*, which Nemirovich-Danchenko wanted to put on at the beginning of the season. Chekhov had hesitated long before giving his consent: he remembered all too well the failure at the Alexandra Theatre. But two years had passed. He had been so

dangerously ill, that certain things could no longer seem so important nor touch him with such painful sharpness as before. . . . Besides, he had never known how to refuse. *The Seagull* was therefore to be presented that winter in Moscow. The author, however, would not see it: the weather was wet, his cough had returned, and he intended to leave for the south, for Yalta where he felt himself in exile, and which he called 'his warm Siberia'. But perhaps it was better thus, for he had terrible memories of certain performances of his plays, and shuddered still when he recalled the first night of *Ivanov* or the poor *Seagull*. . . . 'He was unlucky in the theatre.'

Did he know that his sister Marie had visited Stanislavsky and had begged him, 'almost in tears', to give up his project and look for something else?

'There must be no risking of a second failure', she had said. 'He is so ill . . . It would kill him.'

Chekhov, besides, had not been pleased with the rehearsal of *The Seagull*. The young girl who was playing the part of Nina wept or sobbed at moments when she should have been silent, or let barely a sigh escape: she lacked Vera Kommissarevskaya's divine simplicity. And Stanislavsky gave too much importance to stage effects . . . One could hear the croaking of frogs, the barking of dogs, and the tinkle of sleighbells, all of which seemed to serve no purpose. Finally, when Chekhov appeared, the actors had surrounded him, looking up to him as to an oracle, which had filled him with shyness. The first rehearsal of *The Seagull* on the 9th September, 1898, had left him with an unpleasant impression of mingled apprehension and embarrassment.

That evening, it was not his own play he was watching, but Alexis Tolstoy's drama, *Tsar Fyodor*. The actors were talented, and he watched and listened with pleasure. The women were attractive, and one especially pleased him, playing the part of the Tsarina Irene. She had an expressive face and a beautiful

voice, and acted 'with nobility and feeling'. Her name was Olga Knipper. He had noticed that same thin-lipped, sensitive, intelligent face a few days earlier, during rehearsal of *The Seagull*; she was playing the part of the actress, Madame Arkadin, a vain, frivolous, coquettish woman, who has, however, her moments of tenderness and melancholy, and she played it very well. That evening, she was superb, and at times as he listened to her, he felt a lump in his throat.

When he was asked what he thought of the play, he replied that it was very good, and that he had been struck more than anyone by Irene. He added with a smile that, had he been staying in Moscow, he was sure he would fall in love with such an Irene . . . but he was leaving the following day.

'Irene'—the young actress Olga Leonardovna Knipper—had also been deeply stirred on meeting Chekhov. She was an intelligent, strong-willed girl, gifted, and in love with her job, and her career was just beginning. She came from a good family. Her father was a brilliant engineer, who had been born in one of the Rhine provinces. Olga had not been meant to go on the stage, but her father had died young, leaving nothing but debts, and the family had to extricate itself somehow. They all lived together—mother, children, and two uncles—in a small flat in Moscow. The mother, a charming and energetic woman, taught singing; one of the uncles was a doctor, the other an officer. They were all gifted, lively and gay. Gorky, who came to know them several years later, refers to them in his letters as 'the mad Knipper family'. They were vivacious and quick-tempered, the uncles perpetually quarrelling with each other. Mealtimes were noisy, animated affairs. The children sang and recited. Olga Leonardovna had started by giving music lessons, then had entered Nemirovich-Danchenko's dramatic school, and now was a member of the young theatrical company from which such wonders were expected.

In the small Moscow flat, she rehearsed her parts, while her mother's pupils sang—or, as she said, 'bellowed'—in the next room. In the evenings, one of the uncles read Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Chekhov aloud. And now the same Anton Chekhov had appeared before her in the flesh, and suddenly upon her—on the way she, the obscure Olga Knipper, played her role—depended the happiness and tranquillity of the writer. It was both strange and moving. Doubtless, someone also told her that Chekhov had admired her. She fell in love with him almost immediately.

The first performance of *The Seagull* at the Moscow Arts Theatre took place on the 17th December, 1898. Olga at the time was suffering from severe bronchitis, and had a temperature of over 100, but she went on all the same. There was a poor house. The actors were conscious of the terrible responsibility resting on their shoulders. After the first act, the audience remained sunk in a 'silence of the grave'. One of the actresses fell in a swoon, and 'I myself', wrote Stanislavsky, 'was on the verge of collapsing'.

But the triumph that greeted the end of the play is now a matter for history.

In the spring of 1899, Anton Pavlovich returned to Moscow. A performance of *The Seagull* was given for him alone. The weather was wonderful. Olga Knipper had made the acquaintance of Marie Chekhov the winter before, and a strong friendship had sprung up between the two women. The actress was invited to spend a few days in the country, at Melikhovo. Chekhov behaved towards the young girl with the same bantering tenderness that women found so attractive, while she . . . waited, full of hope and love.

One of Vera Kommissarevskaya's rivals had given that great and unhappy artist the cruel appellation of 'inspired milliner', but there was a grain of truth in the witty and malicious sally. Olga Knipper was very different. She did not have Vera's genius, but

she was more intelligent. Above all, she had energy and vitality, and the gentle Chekhov was delighted with her combative spirit, her ardour, and her love of life. She was gay, and knew how to keep him amused. She talked to him, not only of art and the theatre, but about her companions, about clothes, or about 'the salad she had just eaten, made of potatoes and cucumbers, herrings, Spanish onions, and veal'. She did not question him solely about his literary projects, but asked whether his coat had been properly brushed, had he a good appetite, and how the young trees and flowers in the garden at Yalta were. And she made him laugh. But besides, she did not discover all at once the *tone* most fitting to their relationship. At the beginning of a love-affair, a woman always attempts, more or less consciously, to model herself on the desires of the man she loves. She tries on different states of mind as she would try on hats before a mirror, until she hears her lover's voice saying:

'That one suits you. Keep that one.'

Olga Knipper was by turns coquettish, dreamy, melancholy and dissatisfied. Fortunately for herself, she soon realised that it was not a second Seagull that Chekhov wanted, but a woman in love. So, while her passionate admiration for the writer continued, it was above all for the sick and lonely man that her affection grew.

She spent several days at Yalta, and saw that Anton Pavlovich led a wretched and uncomfortable existence: he did not eat properly, his servants were careless, his shoes were not polished, and while the visits he received interrupted his work, he did not have the courage to close his doors to them. What he needed, she realised, was a wife. Unfortunately, it is always the woman who notices such things first, the man, not until much later, and sometimes, not at all.

The writer and the actress left for Moscow together, travelling as far as Bakhchisaray by carriage. It was August, a summer

month in the Crimea. The countryside had a wild beauty, a mixture of Asia and the Riviera; newly built white villas stood among fields of roses, cypress trees, and deserted Moslem cemeteries. Flat-roofed Tartar villages clustered by the edge of the sea, and then brusquely, in the space between a Tartar gateway and a mosque, would appear a large modern hotel. There were piles of magnificent fruit, the air was clear and pure, and in the evening the lights of ships glimmered across the water. The Crimea was unforgettable.

Chekhov and Olga Knipper crossed the Cocooz Valley, a deep cleft filled with blue shadow ('cocooz' means 'blue-eyed' in the Tartar tongue). They talked softly together, or were silent: the writer made little jokes, as was his custom, which filled her with tender feelings. They exchanged a kiss, nothing more.

He did not stay long in Moscow, but felt ill again, and had to leave. In the spring, the Arts Theatre company visited the Crimea, and gave several triumphal performances. Chekhov loved the theatre and the life it brought with it, the long conversations, the walks along the seashore, the garden parties, and the company of intelligent men and beautiful women. Olga personified for him that free and brilliant life from which he was excluded. Once again, he wanted to leave Yalta: he was feeling fit and youthful, and almost cured. But once again, he was unable to stay in Moscow more than a few days.



## Chapter Thirty-One

THE Arts Theatre, meanwhile, had achieved an unparalleled success. At the beginning of the winter season of 1899, the public waited in the street from one o'clock in the morning for the box-office to open. On the first day, there was a queue of 2,500. The whole of Moscow, in fact, spoke of nothing but these productions. They included Shakespeare, Alexis Tolstoy's *Tsar Fyodor* and *The Death of Ivan the Terrible*, Chekhov's *The Seagull*, and his new play, *Uncle Vanya*, in which Olga Knipper played the part of Helénè.

*Uncle Vanya* had already been put on in the provinces, with a certain amount of success: now, in Moscow, it was a triumph. After having seen it, Gorky wrote: 'I wept like a woman, although I am not an excitable man.'

Far away in Yalta, Chekhov had to content himself with reading the criticisms of the play, waiting for letters that did not always arrive, and thinking of the young actress. She led such a full life—what could he mean to her now?

'Last night, there was a fire. I got out of bed. From the terrace, I watched the flames, and I felt terribly alone.' (29th September, 1899.)

'I am in a rage. I envy the rat who runs under the floor of your theatre.' (4th October, 1899.)

She in turn wondered anxiously whether it was the stage or

herself that he missed. At least, in the theatre, she had the feeling of helping him to the best of her ability. On New Year's eve, after the fourth act of *Uncle Vanya*, the voice of an unknown speaker rang out from the packed house:

'We want to thank you from the bottom of our hearts, on behalf of the people of Moscow, for all we have felt and experienced in your theatre . . .'

'We were touched and confused', wrote Olga Knipper.

That Chekhov admired her as an artist, she knew, she was certain of it. But it was something else she wanted. Someone told her that Anton Pavlovich was leaving for abroad, and she wrote to him:

'You cannot do that, do you understand? . . .'

Could he have forgotten her?

'No, no, it's not possible. I won't believe it. For the love of God, write! I am waiting, waiting . . .'

But everything between them was curiously vague: a kiss, a few tender words, then a sort of affectionate friendship which left her unsatisfied.

'Why are you in a bad mood?' Chekhov replied to her complaints. 'You live and work and hope . . . you laugh . . . what more can you want? With me, it is different. I am uprooted from the soil. I do not live fully; I do not drink, although I like drinking. I like noise and bustle, and I hear none. In short, I am at present in the same situation as a transplanted tree, still uncertain whether it will acclimatise itself or wither away.'  
(10th February, 1900.)

In the end, she became angry—it was as if he did not want to understand her. 'What more can you want?' It was a question only a man could ask! 'No doubt there is plenty of coquetry in man as well,' she wrote, but once again he replied in a tone of melancholy jesting, and she felt discouraged.

'Around me I hear people talking of your new play, and I

alone know nothing and have heard nothing. No one believes me when I shrug my shoulders to these questions, and reply quite candidly that I know nothing. However, let it be as you wish. Oh, how dull life is! . . . ' (22nd March, 1900.)

You are very unhappy, Chekhov wrote back, but you must realise that it will not be for long, for soon, very soon, you will be in the train and you will look on things with sharpened relish.

Summer was drawing near, and the young woman left for Yalta.

'What has happened to you? I send you friendly greetings, also to Masha and Evgenia Yakovlevna (Chekhov's sister and mother). Mama sends greetings. Olga Knipper.' (3rd June, 1900.)

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Between Sebastopol and Kharkov, 6th August, 1900:

'Good morning, darling! Did you spend a good night?'

Their liaison had begun in the Crimea, perhaps in the same Gursuf where Vera Kommissarevskaya had tried in vain to lure Chekhov to her, perhaps in the Yalta house. She used to come to him in his study in the evenings, when everyone was asleep. In the garden grew the 'slender and supple' acacias that Anton Pavlovich had planted. 'At the least breath of wind, they swayed pensively and bent over, and there was something fantastic in their movements, and also something restless and nostalgic.'

Chekhov and Olga Leonardovna watched them together through the big Italian windows, which caught the moonlight. They could hear the murmur of the sea, and the sighing of the wind in the trees. From the road resounded the voices and laughter of tourists who went out on excursions on fine nights; the young people made fires up in the hills, or went swimming in the moonlight, and their songs drifted over to the white house. Chekhov's mother and sister had long since been asleep in their quiet little rooms, and they had to be careful not to wake

them. They would be deeply shocked by this intrigue with an actress under their own roof, thought Anton Pavlovich. But Olga Knipper reflected that the two women had long ago guessed what was happening . . . All the same, they spoke softly, and smothered the sound of kisses and laughter. She loved those nights spent idly chattering with Chekhov, and the writer was both amused and touched by the little humorous anecdotes she told him, and her childish pranks. (She would undo her coils of hair and let them fall down over her shoulders and pretend to be a sorceress.) She took great pains over preparing the coffee which they drank together. Then they were silent. When the night was over, he took her back to the staircase, whose steps creaked so loudly in the shadows.

But the summer was passing, and once more they had to part. He had not uttered the awaited words or fixed a date for the marriage. He hesitated. Could he tear her from the theatre? She would not want to leave it, and he had too deep a respect for other people's freedom to ask that sacrifice of her. But if she stayed on in the theatre, and he remained sick in Yalta, what sort of a marriage would it be? All he could expect was a renewal of solitude, empty days, and a life which was 'neither gay nor tedious, but merely uniform', with its only perspective approaching death, and its only events the rare visit of an admirer, the daily papers, and a temperature in the evening. During which time, she in Moscow would continue dancing 'until half-past five in the morning, in a golden dress *en grand décolleté*', courted and admired, and with a life so remote from his! It was not that he was jealous. He rejoiced in her happiness and her successes. But he was a man, after all, and wanted her to himself. When he came to spend a few days in Moscow, she was not able to give up all her thoughts and time to him, as he would have liked. 'When I arrive, we will go once more to Petrovskoe-Razumovskoe (a park on the outskirts of Moscow).

But if only it is for the whole day, and the weather fine, autumn weather, and you in a good mood, and if only you do not tell me every five minutes that you have to run off to a rehearsal!' (20th August, 1900.)

'When winter comes, you will forget what sort of a man I am; I shall fall in love with someone else, I shall meet someone else just like you; and everything will be the same as before . . .'

'Tomorrow, my mother is leaving for Moscow, and perhaps soon I, too, shall leave, although it's quite an absurd idea. Why leave? Why? Just to see each other and then separate again? How entertaining . . .'

Sometimes, for all his self-control and the reserve he felt about expressing his feelings, a complaint or a reproach escaped him:

'You are terribly cold,' he wrote, 'as, for that matter, an actress should be. Don't be angry, darling, I merely mention it, among other things . . .'

But she loved him, and had quite decided that he must belong to her. In Russia, it was as often as not the woman who decided such matters; while the man, with his gentle, dreamy and passive nature, willingly put his life into his companion's hands.

Everyone around her knew or had guessed their romance. Anton Pavlovich, writing to his sister, added formally: 'Give Olga Leonardovna my best wishes.'

'We both laughed,' Olga wrote back, 'oh, what a child you are . . .'

But at times she became uneasy. He wrote so rarely: perhaps he did not want to see her again. What was he hiding from her? Was it true that he was leaving again for abroad? Why? Could he not come to Moscow for a few days? The weather was fine. In the manner of women, she asked a thousand questions while refusing to answer the one question Chekhov asked—unformulated, it is true, but which could be read between the lines

of his letters: would she one day be his alone, or forever divided between him and the theatre?

Then she would cry, with touching feminine obtuseness:

'But you have a tender and loving heart, why do you harden it?'

Chekhov had a horror of anything that smacked of scenes or quarrels, or of those dialogues between two people who endeavour in vain to reveal the inner thoughts that can never be completely revealed, and exhaust themselves in a futile attempt to lay bare their souls to one another. It was better to endure and be silent.

Sadly, he wrote this exquisite letter:

'In Yalta, there is still no rain. What a drought! The poor trees, especially those growing on this side of the hill, have not had a single drop of water all summer, and now they have turned yellow: in the same way, it happens to some people to go through their whole lives without receiving one drop of happiness. No doubt, that's the way it has to be.' (27th September, 1900.)

Life would go on, he thought. Olga would come, and then depart once more. He would never have a real home. No doubt, that was the way it had to be.

But when he invited her once more to Yalta, she refused indignantly. She did not want to go on being his mistress, and seeing him in secret at night—'it is impossible, you have such delicate perception, and yet you ask me! Is it possible that you don't understand?' (3rd March, 1901.) She said she would not be able to bear old Madame Chekhov's pained look and Marie's astonishment. 'You remember how distressing it was last summer, and what torture we went through. How long do we have to go on hiding ourselves? And why? . . . It seems to me that you have grown cold towards me, that you no longer love me as you used to do, and that all you really want is for me to

come and hang about you; you do not see me as a being near to you.'

Meanwhile, her theatre career continued. She played in Moscow, and for a season in St. Petersburg.

That was in March of 1901. Troubles had broken out in the capital. On the square in front of the Kazan Cathedral, the Cossacks charged the crowd, lashing out with their *nagaiki*. A number of students and young girls were killed or wounded. Blood ran in other large towns. The Moscow Arts Theatre company dined at *Contant's*<sup>1</sup>; Olga Knipper wore a dress of black velvet, with a little lace collar. St. Petersburg argued passionately about Stanislavsky's production methods, Ibsen's dramas, and the new play by Chekhov: *The Three Sisters*.

<sup>1</sup> A famous St. Petersburg restaurant.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

**I**F you give me your word that not a soul in Moscow will know of our marriage until it is over, I will marry you on the very day I arrive, if you wish. I am horribly afraid of the wedding, I don't know why, and the congratulations, and the way one has to hold a glass of champagne in one's hand and smile vaguely.' (*Thursday, 19th April, 1901.*)

Thus all that the young woman had imagined and dreaded (a sudden coldness on Chekhov's part, misunderstandings, a thousand chimeras) amounted merely to a masculine timidity and reserve. She smiled, reflected once more no doubt that he was really a big child, and agreed to everything he asked. And their marriage was, in fact, enveloped in such mystery that even Chekhov's nearest relations knew nothing of it. His brother, Ivan Pavlovich, called on the very day of the wedding, and guessed nothing. On Friday, 25th May, 1901, in a small church in Moscow, the writer and the actress were married solely in the presence of the four witnesses required by law. After a brief visit to Olga Leonardovna's mother, who had not even dared to ask them to dinner for fear of displeasing Chekhov, they left at once for Nizhni-Novgorod and the banks of the Volga. In Moscow, the doctors had not been satisfied with Anton Pavlovich's health, and had prescribed for him a cure of mare's



milk. This treatment seems to have had much success in Russia in the early 1900's, and we know that Tolstoy sometimes had recourse to the same remedy.

Chekhov and his wife spent the spring on the banks of the Volga, in a sanatorium, and then left for Yalta. But they were not able to remain together for long: autumn arrived, and the opening of the theatrical season. Olga Knipper left her husband in the Crimea, and returned to Moscow.

Now began a strange and, for two people in love, painful existence, made up of ceaseless partings and regrets, misunderstandings, frustrated hopes and lamentations, and for Chekhov, an ever-renewed solitude.

At the commencement of their marriage, he had written to Olga Leonardovna:

'My cough robs me of all energy . . . You must think for the future . . . Be the mistress: as you say, so I will act.'

To be sure, he had always loved her for her ardour and vitality, and perhaps for a certain masculine coldness which lay concealed beneath a very feminine and graceful exterior. She wept often, for she suffered from her 'nerves'. She always said that he alone could soothe and comfort her, and that she needed him, but in reality, he was forced to recognise that she could do without him. It was a poor enough life that he could offer her—that of sick-nurse in sad and dusty Yalta, when she could work and travel, study and amuse herself, and, in short, lead a full life. Any other mode of life would have entailed a sacrifice on her part, and it was just this sacrifice that he did not want to ask. For a woman of Latin race, the question might have been simpler, but she was a Nordic: absolute devotion to a man seemed hard to her, and to Chekhov, such a quality would have seemed incomprehensible and barbaric. She was a human being like himself. She had to lead a full life, while he . . . 'no doubt, it is simply my fate', he said.

He rarely complained, and if he did, it was in the gentlest and most discreet manner: 'Life is very dull without you. I have grown accustomed to you, as though I were a child . . .' (24th August, 1901.) 'I love you, I feel dull without you, my joy, my little German girl, my little one. Your second letter is shorter, and I am afraid that you may be growing cold towards me, or at least, that you are getting used to not having me near you.' (27th August. 1901).

'I long passionately to have my wife to myself—I am bored away from her and Moscow: but there is nothing one can do. I think of you and remember you almost every hour. I love you, dearest . . .' (15th November, 1901.)

She too was suffering. She loved him with a feverish tenderness, and was consumed by remorse. When they were together, during the summer months or on brief encounters in the Crimea or in Moscow, they lived so quietly and happily . . . She looked after him perfectly, watching over what he ate and how he dressed. When she was not there, the meals were poor, the stoves were not lit, and the servants neglected their duties. Anton Pavlovich's mother and an old servant looked after him, but one was 70 and the other 80, and whatever efforts they made for his well-being, the results left much to be desired. Chekhov certainly needed his wife; she thought sadly of the sick and lonely writer, with his 'dear, kind face', and his 'eyes so caressing and tender'. And she wrote:

'I want to be with you. I blame myself bitterly for not having left the stage. I don't understand myself what is going on inside me, and that vexes me . . . It hurts me to think of you alone down there, feeling sad and bored, while I am here, engaged on an ephemeral task, instead of giving myself entirely to my love.'

She might write thus, but as soon as he showed signs of agreeing with her ('You want to abandon the theatre? Is it true?'), immediately she exclaimed:

'Without work, I would become bored altogether. I would drag myself from one place to another, and every trifle would get on my nerves. I have lost the habit of an idle life, and I am not young enough to shatter in one second what it has taken me such pains to achieve.'

This was a truly heartfelt cry. It was hard for an energetic and greatly talented woman to give up her legitimate aspirations. Chekhov realised the fact, and from that time on, not only did he abstain from the slightest complaint, but with extraordinary nobility of soul, he made every effort to comfort and reassure her, and show her that she was in no way guilty:

'If you and I are not able to live together, it is neither you nor I who are the guilty ones, but the demon who has filled me with bacilli and you with the love of art.'

Thus they went on living apart. Olga was either in Moscow or St. Petersburg. Hard but fruitful work, success in the theatre, and friendship with the most famous men and brilliant women made up her happy lot. The first plays of Maxim Gorky were being put on that season, and the new writer had aroused the greatest enthusiasm. Ibsen and Sudermann were also much discussed. Corrupt old government officials shed tears as they listened to *Uncle Vanya*, or to the cry of the three sisters: To Moscow! To Moscow! And what balls and bouquets, what banquets and after-theatre suppers there were! Olga Leonardovna was as much acclaimed on her own account and for her own talent as because she was Anton Pavlovich's wife. She was known as an intelligent and brilliant actress. She passed with ease from the world of Gorky's 'slums' to high society roles. She wore—with equal pleasure—now the rags of some social outcast, now the flame-red dress of a courtesan in one of Nemirovich-Danchenko's plays. For the latest production, she had been allowed 1,200 roubles by the management to spend on her costumes ('In the second act, I shall have a red ball-dress

that will glow like a flame, covered with brilliant spangles'). The actors of the Arts Theatre did not live in a world apart, with their interests confined solely to the stage, but were received and fêted everywhere. They acted before the Tsar. They were applauded by poor students, aristocrats, high government officials and rich merchants alike. All Russia knew them, and they breathed in an atmosphere of praise and adulation.

'The Arts Theatre,' wrote Gorky, 'is as fine and important as the Tretyakov Gallery, as Vassili Blazhenny, as all that is best in Moscow.'

The young company were aware of the hopes vested in them and the pride they aroused. Every triumph gave them fresh strength, and every mistake served not to dishearten but to spur them on. And how time flew! The rehearsals were long and painstaking, but all the preparatory work was done in a joyful fever of enthusiasm. The absence of stars, the co-operation as a group, and a certain spirit of sacrifice and self-effacement before the needs of the common task, all served to raise and ennoble the theatre. In her letters, Olga Knipper barely mentions salaries, publicity never, and only rarely jealousies and intrigues. She was animated by an extraordinary passion for work well done. After her work, various diversions played a large part in her life. Sometimes it was a supper with friends ('Everything was excellent: little mushrooms, herrings, *zakuski*, wonderful little pies that melted in the mouth, a sturgeon, meat and vegetables, and a chocolate ice'), sometimes the actors put on a performance for themselves and their friends ('We went on with the party until four in the morning. It was a kind of madness . . . I played at being a cat and a mouse'), and sometimes they all met in Olga's own home ('the flat was upside down; we ate and drank and sang and danced'). Then there was a Christmas party, and a supper that went on until ten o'clock the following morning, because only at seven o'clock did Chaliapin, who up to then had been in

a bad mood, suddenly grow mellow and begin singing gypsy songs.

'What a wonderful time you are having, dearest,' wrote Anton Pavlovich. At that, she protested:

'Do you call it having a wonderful time, our craziness of the past few days? Really, my dear!'

And indeed, for her, it was merely the ordinary and monotonous daily round, and she would not have felt a moment's hesitation at abandoning all these delights to run to her husband. It was only the 'voracious theatre' that held her back.

Chekhov, meanwhile, described for her his own existence: he had been spitting blood for a few days, but was better now. Above all, she was not to worry. He was wearing a compress, which was huge and uncomfortable. There was no cream to be had in Yalta; the doctors had advised him to eat a lot, and he was doing his best, but often had little appetite. He had caught two mice. Who would dare to say that he was idle? The weather was cold and rainy.

Was he seeing many people? Yes, far too many. 'A friend has just borrowed 600 roubles from me until Friday. People are always borrowing money "until Friday".' Could not his wife come and spend two or three days with him, no more? It was impossible? What a shame—perhaps she would come for Christmas? Not even then? A new play was being rehearsed, and her days were fully taken up. She was very sorry to cause him distress. Poor Anton!—Had he expected her? Of course not, he wrote—'I am not expecting you for the holidays, you mustn't come here, my dear little one. Work hard—we will still have time to live together. I bless you, little one.' Perhaps she would manage to pay him a visit during the first week of Lent.

But the theatre was all-consuming. She would tear herself away from the stage for four or five days, arrive and create around him the semblance of a home. She would sit near him in his large

armchair, or kneel before him at his feet. She would talk to him about the theatre, and sing the songs he liked. Then she would be gone again, and he would remain alone. He used to sit on a bench in the sun, among his favourite dogs, and listen to the strange, raucous cries of the storks. He trimmed the rose-bushes, but this soon made him tired, his breathing became difficult, and he had to return slowly to his bench.

He wrote: 'God be with you. Be happy and keep well, little one; write a longer letter to your wicked husband. When you are in a bad mood, you become old and listless, and when you are gay or in your ordinary mood, you are an angel.' (15th December, 1901.)

She had drunk and danced until eight o'clock in the morning: 'If only you knew how I envy you! I envy you your courage, your freshness, your health, your good humour . . .' 'I live like a monk, and I dream only of you . . .'

It was a curious marriage, and without doubt there was an equal and ardent love on both sides. But unlike most cases it was the man who sacrificed his happiness for his companion's sake, and the woman who accepted his sacrifice. Such a reversal of roles was certainly outside the normal, for it caused Olga Knipper to feel many pangs of secret remorse, and she was never able to be entirely happy.

They rarely spoke of the thing that kept them apart. It would have been no good. As he grew older, the writer became more and more taciturn and reserved. He did not want to complain, nor even to make his desires explicit: all words were false. No one could understand what another person felt. Above all, one must avoid preaching and moralising and voicing lofty sentiments. It was entirely useless: one had to die alone, as one had lived, and neither love nor friendship could mitigate that solitude. All one could do was to be silent—to endure all, and bow down without a word. 'Suffer and be silent . . . Whatever others

may say, and whatever you may feel, be silent, be silent . . .'

What he longed for with all his being was serenity and detachment. But it was not easy. There were many things to which he clung—to the success of his plays and books, to his wife, to health, and to life itself. But gradually, all these things slipped from his grasp.

He lay with a temperature in his study, and thought, with a sigh:

'To live in order to die is no joke, but to live knowing that one must die young is utterly stupid . . .'

Life did not make sense—or, at least, it was impossible for man to discover the sense in it: it was something that eluded human reason. Man had no power except over himself, over his own soul. Through long patience and forbearance, with dignity and calm, a man might refashion his own heart. Of that alone, Chekhov was sure.

Yalta had become hateful to him. The Crimea was beautiful, but this town, in character 'both European and petty bourgeois', was like a fair. 'Stuffy little hotels, in which wretched consumptives slowly waste away, insolent Tartar faces . . . a smell of perfumes, instead of the perfume of the cedars and the sea.' He had never like Yalta; now he found it unbearable, and longed to flee. The three sisters reiterate: 'To Moscow! To Moscow!' Their words are only a reflection of Chekhov himself. He missed Moscow, with its bells and sledges and freezing air: Moscow was life, the theatre, and love. Here, he strolled aimlessly by the sea-shore, a thin figure with a light tread, and soft, almost feminine eyes. His lined face had grown more severe, his hair was always too long, and his beard neglected. Young girls gazed on him with adoring eyes. He had had a small white house built for himself in Yalta, in a dusty avenue, and there he lived with his mother. The rooms were always cold and silent. When evening came, two candles burned on his work table. Sometimes, he would spend

the whole day motionless in an armchair, his eyes closed. His aged mother, knowing that he did not like to speak of his health, hesitated, sighed, then unable to contain herself any longer, went up to him and asked timidly:

‘Are you ill, Antosha?’

He replied:

‘No, it’s nothing. I have a slight headache.’

When he was feeling better, he used to stroll in the garden, or go to look at the Tartar cemetery nearby, bathed in sunshine. Did he sometimes remember the incautious avowal he had once made: ‘. . . A happiness that goes on day in day out, from one morning to the next—that I could not endure. I promise to be an excellent husband, but give me a wife who, like the moon, will not always be on my horizon.’ (*Letter to Suvorin*, 1895.)



## Chapter Thirty-Three

CHEKHOV was writing *The Cherry Orchard*. He wanted this new play to be a gay, light affair, perhaps in order to tear himself away from the sadness of life. Gradually, and quite inexplicably, *The Cherry Orchard* became a drama. The whole play gives off an odour of death. What Chekhov put on the stage were ruined nobles, a splendid estate doomed to destruction, and gentle, querulous, defenceless beings. In *The Cherry Orchard* one finds a memory of Babbino, an echo of the evenings in Ukraine and in the Lintvarevs' house, by-gone days and vanished faces—a large part of Chekhov's own youth. He himself said that he was only able to write of the past: 'the subject must have been filtered through my memory, leaving behind only what is important or typical'. Now that he was living remote from the Russian countryside, it rose up before him afresh. *The Cherry Orchard* was of course written for the Moscow Arts Theatre. In that year (1903-1904), the doctors at last permitted Chekhov to leave Yalta. He was delighted to be returning at last to the atmosphere of snow and ice that he loved. The mere sight of his fur-lined cloak and cap filled him with childish joy.

'It seemed,' wrote Olga Knipper, 'as if fate had decided to spoil him and give him at last, for a brief season, all that he held dear . . . Moscow, winter, and the theatre!'

*The Cherry Orchard* was a triumph. Chekhov's three earlier plays (*The Seagull* at the Moscow Theatre, *Uncle Vanya* and *The Three Sisters*) had been launched on their successful careers in the author's absence, and all he had seen were the initial failures. But that year, fate was kind to him. After the last act of *The Cherry Orchard*, the audience saw a frail, wan figure appear on the stage. 'Very attentively and seriously', Chekhov listened to the rising applause. Admired as a writer, he was also respected as a man. It was not only 'the Russian Maupassant' who was being fêted, but a human being who had lived with dignity and courage. People told how he had looked after his peasants at Melikhovo during the epidemics, and how (though he had never had any money, and died poor) he had helped the poor people and the consumptives in Yalta. Even more, they repeated in undertones the terms of his letter of resignation to the Academy. He had been elected to it a short time earlier, together with Maxim Gorky, but the Tsar had had the latter's election annulled for political reasons, and Chekhov had refused to sit any longer among the academicians. In the acclamation which greeted him that evening, there was certainly an element of snobbery and demagoguery; Chekhov doubtless sensed their presence, and it was this, perhaps, that made his gaze so serious and penetrating. He had never been fooled by appearances. 'He seemed to survey all that agitation from a great height, from a bird's-eye view.' But behind all the flourishes of fame, there were a real love and respect that made him very happy. He was barely able to stand. There were cries of: 'Sit down! Anton Pavlovich, rest yourself!'

He refused, and had to be seated almost by force in a large arm-chair which was dragged on to the stage. Thus seated, he appeared even more pale and fragile than before, and all realised that before them was a doomed man. It was the 17th January, 1904. Exactly forty-four years earlier, in a shabby house in Taganrog, the shopkeeper's son had been born. Perhaps he was

thinking of that far-off childhood, perhaps of the death that was drawing near.

At the beginning of the summer, he left with his wife for Badenweiler, a clean and attractive German watering-place in the Black Forest. He spent a few days in Berlin, where the German doctors noticed that his heart was showing signs of fatigue. The lungs themselves were so ravaged that he might live six or eight months, but no more. In spite of everything, Olga Leonardovna did not entirely give up hope. Chekhov himself had his good days, when he felt relatively well, and made plans for work and travel. Nevertheless, before leaving Berlin, he gave orders that all money due to him should be paid in to his wife's account. When the friend whom he charged with arranging this looked astonished and asked his reason, Chekhov hesitated, then, gently shrugging his shoulders, said:

'For no particular reason—just in case . . .'

He found a comfortable hotel, surrounded by an attractive garden. His room caught the sun until seven in the evening. He sat on the balcony, and watched the town, the passers-by, and the mountains in the distance. There were painful crises when he could not get his breath. He spoke little, but at times a mischievous expression flitted across his fever-wasted face, and he told some humorous anecdote, in that tender, bantering tone that was so much his, and which made Olga Leonardovna laugh until the tears came. As death drew nearer, he became more calm, patient and gentle, but also more distant, withdrawing imperceptibly into himself, into some last island of solitude in his own heart. Then suddenly, one hot July day, he felt ill. For three days, his life hung in the balance; at last, he seemed to be recovering—his heart still held firm. Towards evening, he told his wife that he felt much better.

'Go and get some air, go for a walk in the park,' he murmured in a weak voice.

Frightened, she had not left him: but now he insisted. She went to the park, and on her return he seemed to be worried. Why had she not dined? She must be hungry. Up to the last minute, he thought more of her than of himself. But neither of them had heard the gong for dinner. Olga Leonardovna lay down for the night on a small couch near Anton Pavlovich's bed. She was silent, feeling sad and tired out—although, she said later, she had not the faintest suspicion the end was so near.

In order to distract her, Anton Pavlovich began to make up a story, 'describing a fashionable watering-place, with a great number of prosperous-looking bathers, all healthy specimens with hearty appetites, red-cheeked Englishmen and Americans, and one day . . . they all return home dreaming of a splendid dinner, but the cook has departed'. How would all these fortunate, pampered beings react to such a blow of fate? He talked and Olga Leonardovna laughed as she listened. Night came, and gradually the hotel and the little town drifted into sleep in the circle of forests and hills. The sick man became silent. A few hours later, he called to his wife, and asked her to fetch a doctor. 'For the first time in his life,' Olga Leonardovna said, 'he asked for a doctor himself.'

The hotel was full, but everyone was asleep, and Chekhov's wife felt even more abandoned and alone in the midst of that indifferent crowd. Then she remembered that two Russian students lived nearby, and went and woke them up. One of them ran to find a doctor, while Olga Leonardovna broke some ice to put on the dying man's heart. Gently, he pushed her away:

'It's no use putting ice on an empty heart . . .'

It was a warm July night. All the windows had been opened, but the sick man was breathing with difficulty. The doctor gave him an injection of camphorated oil, but it failed to revive the heart: the end had come, and champagne was brought. 'Anton Pavlovich sat up', wrote Olga Knipper, 'and with a sort of

gravity, said aloud in German to the doctor (he spoke German very badly): "*Ich sterbe.*" Then he took the glass, turned his face to me, smiled his marvellous smile, and said: "I haven't drunk champagne for a long time." He drank calmly, draining the glass; then he lay back gently on his left side.'

At the same moment, a huge black moth entered the room. It flew from wall to wall, hurling itself against the lighted lamps, thudded painfully down with scorched wings, then fluttered up again in its blind, impulsive flight. Then it found the open window, and disappeared into the soft, dark night. Chekhov, meanwhile, had ceased speaking and breathing: his life was ended.

## EPILOGUE

**T**IME passed, and Russia went through the Japanese war, the defeat that followed, and the revolution of 1905. In 1914 she was plunged into a second, more terrible, war, while a second defeat and another, crueller, revolution drew near.

Maxim Gorky was at that time ill and living in Finland. One evening, he remembered his friend Chekhov, who had died ten years before. He wrote:

'I have had a temperature for the past five days, but I do not want to go to bed. The fine greyish rain of Finland is covering the earth with moistened dust. The guns are thundering on the Juno fortress . . . At night, the searchlights lick the clouds with their tongues . . . It is a frightful spectacle, which does not for a moment allow one to forget the devilish spell of war.

'I have just been reading Chekhov. If he had not died ten years ago, the war would no doubt have killed him; it would have poisoned him beforehand by filling his heart with hatred for men. I remember his funeral.

'The coffin of the writer whom Moscow "loved so dearly" arrived in a green goods-waggon, bearing in huge letters on its doors the following inscription: "Oysters." A section of the meagre crowd which had gathered at the station accidentally followed the coffin of General Keller, who was being brought

back from Manchuria, and were astonished to see Chekhov buried to the strains of a military band. When at last they realised their mistake, a number of jovial persons began to smile and laugh derisively. Chekhov's coffin was followed by a hundred people, not more. I remember in particular two barristers, both wearing new shoes and flamboyant ties, who looked as if they were going to a wedding. I walked behind them, and I heard one of them, Vassili A. Maklakov, talking about the intelligence of dogs; someone else, whom I did not know, was boasting of the comforts of his villa and the beauty of the surrounding countryside. And a lady in a mauve dress, with a lace parasol, was trying to persuade a little old man in horn-rimmed spectacles: "Oh! He was extraordinarily nice, and so witty!" The old man hemmed and hawed with an incredulous expression. It was a hot, dusty day. A large gendarme, mounted on a large horse, rode majestically in front of the procession.'

But among the indifferent crowd, two women walked together: Chekhov's wife, and his aged mother. He had loved them more than anything else in this world.





